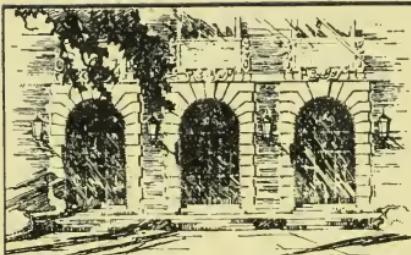


A MAN'S MISTAKE

BY THE AUTHOR OF
ST OLAVE'S



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A MAN'S MISTAKE.

VOL. II.



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A MAN'S MISTAKE

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“ST. OLAVE'S,” “JANITA'S CROSS,” “ANNETTE,”
“LITTLE MISS PRIMROSE,”
&c., &c.

“Whatsoever thou takest in hand, remember the end,
and thou shalt never do amiss.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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A MAN'S MISTAKE.

CHAPTER I.

VERY soon after that, Mr. Aubury took his leave of the two ladies, the time of the doctor's return being so very uncertain.

“I hope we shall soon see you again,” was Mrs. Polemont's parting salutation, as she shook hands with him more warmly than usual.

“I think you will,” he said, and said no more. Five minutes later, the sound of his departing footsteps was growing fainter and fainter upon the quiet village road.

“Well, Maria?” said the brisk little woman, when she returned to the drawing-room, after seeing Mr. Aubury away.

“Well, Isabel?”

“Oh! come, now, don’t be a plague. Tell me all about it. Have you come to an understanding?”

“We have.”

“And have you accepted him?”

“I have.”

“Oh, you dear, good, delightful old creature! Was there ever anything so perfectly fortunate? Oh! I *should* like to ask you exactly what he said, but I suppose it wouldn’t be proper. All the same, I could have told you, days and days ago, that it was going to happen, only you wouldn’t have believed me. I am so glad! I don’t think anything else in all the world could have made me gladder.”

And the doctor’s warm-hearted little wife gave her visitor a frantic hug of satisfaction, and then squeezed up the

embroidery and flung it to the farther end of the sofa, in order that there might be a clear space for her to seat herself and discuss the whole affair.

"Take care," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, drawing it back again and beginning to smooth out the creases carefully. "You know, such a very little thing spoils this sort of material, and I have taken such pains with it."

"Maria! You dear old piece of petrifaction. As if I hadn't taken ever so much more pains with the *other* sort of material. The idea of your being able to think about your stupid bit of embroidery just now! Why, if I were in your place, I shouldn't have a thought except that I was going to be Mrs. Aubury of Florey Castle. Dear me! but I *am* glad, though of course you will be a very much greater person than I am myself. You must not look down upon me on that account, will you now?"

"Isabel dear. As if I should be so ungrateful!"

"No, it was only a joke; you are not the one to forget your friends in that way. But oh, dear, it *is* so delightful! I feel as if I should like to put my bonnet on and go round and tell everyone right off. I shall to-morrow morning."

"Nonsense, Isabel. How foolish it would look!"

"I shall. And when is it going to be?"

"I don't know at all," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, still smoothing out the ruffled embroidery. "Mr. Aubury did not say anything about that. Indeed he had only just mentioned the subject to me, and I had given him my reply, when you came in."

"What a thousand pities! I would have stayed out ever so much longer if I had known, but really I seemed to have been creeping about in the garden for an age. It was only an excuse, you know, to

go at all. But how fortunate that George was sent for, wasn't it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it made a better opening for the interview. Oh! Maria, if you only knew how I had been twisting my brain to get it settled properly; and that going into the fern-house to look at those good-for-nothing little bits of dead stick was such a bungling excuse, though it was the only way of preventing you from being placed in an uncomfortable position. But with old Hester Brocklebank having one of her fits everything came right."

"Indeed! It was poor old Hester. I am very sorry for her. You will send her wine to-morrow, will you not, Isabel?"

Mrs. Plummersleigh said this in her district voice.

"Wine?—oh, yes, wine, and tea, and tobacco, and all sort of things, as a thank-offering to her for having had such a convenient fit. I am sure we can't be

grateful enough. And when is Mr. Aubury coming again?"

"He said, as he was going away, that he would be here to-morrow morning."

"Did he? I never heard it. But of course he would just whisper it to yourself. I will be out, so that you can have a quiet time to yourselves."

"But not out telling people about it, Isabel."

"I don't know; I am sure I shall not be able to hold it in ~~very~~ long. You will begin to call him Owen now, I suppose. I almost feel as if I could do the same myself."

"Oh, Isabel! I should feel so uncomfortable, if you did. I have never even thought of it."

"Then you will soon have to do so. If you don't, he will remind you of it. It is almost the first right an engaged man insists upon, to be called by his Christian name. And how comical it will seem when

he calls you Maria! I am sure I shall not be able to keep from laughing. Not that I don't feel the solemnity of the whole thing immensely, of course, but I can't help being amused by details."

"No; but please don't suggest anything of the kind to him. I should be very sorry for him to think that we wished to be familiar."

"Oh! dear, no. But I shall not need to suggest it. You may be quite sure he will develop the idea out of his own consciousness—George did. But, Maria, I am forgetting you have gone through it all before. Now was Mr. Plummersleigh a long time before he began to call you Maria? You know I never used to like to talk about him very much to you, but now that you have felt able to accept somebody else it makes a difference. What was his other name?"

"We will not talk about him, Isabel dear," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, in her

quiet manner. "I don't like to mix up things. And now I think I will say good night."

"Good night indeed! Why, you don't mean to say you are going to bed?"

"Yes; I am rather tired. I should like to be alone."

"Well, perhaps you ought. You do look a little bit upset, and I don't wonder. I know I did not get over it for days when George first spoke to me. Would you rather lie still to-morrow morning? I will bring your breakfast up."

"Oh! dear, no, thank you. I shall be quite myself after a night's rest."

Then the two ladies kissed each other, and Mrs. Plummersleigh retired.

As soon as she had locked her door, and looked under the bed, and seen that the window was fast, and had carefully folded up the lace which Mrs. Polemont had draped so prettily over her shoulders, she went down on her knees to say her prayers.

Not that she did not go down upon them every night of her life to thank the Almighty for the mercies of the day, Mrs. Plummersleigh being a person of steady religious habits, and knowing as well as most people what was due to propriety. But to-night the mercies were so exceptional, and the future they opened to her so unexpected, that an extra five minutes was, she felt, the least she could give. And, as she never trusted to the impulse of the moment for words, she took her little book of devotions, and, turning over its pages until she came to a "prayer of thanksgiving for unusual mercies," she read it through very seriously, and then went to bed, lying awake a little while, of course, to think into shape all that had happened during the day.

It was comparatively easy for Mrs. Plummersleigh to think those events into shape, because they, as well as the future towards which they led, were unmixed

with the least suspicion of sentiment. This morn of her unexpected prosperity had arisen all untouched by any rosy mists of hope, mists which love's noonday should by-and-by wreath into still brighter clouds, to hover in their fleecy whiteness over the blue sky of her content. Rather that future lay spread out before her now like one of the latest and most superior editions of the ordnance survey, in which every gate-post and turnpike-bar, and plentiful farm-steading, with its attendant foldyard, and stable, and pigstye, is duly, and after correct measurement, set down.

And, sufficient allowance being made for the gratitude beforehand, Mrs. Plummers-leigh looked over it with the feeling of an estate-agent, or an intelligent sapper and miner, who has had to do with the planning of the whole, rather than with the joy of the artist who breathes into it his own spirit, and into whose soul it pours its own fulness of delight.

But it *was* unexpected. Mrs. Polemont's guest had never uttered a truth more profoundly true than when she said to Mr. Aubury—the needle, meanwhile, just trembling in her hand on the point of that blackberry leaf—that his words had taken her by surprise. And the hints dropped by the doctor's wife, good-natured little whispers and suggestions, had fallen upon the intensely practical ground of her character like seed upon the wayside, carried away forthwith by the hungry fowls of daily interests and necessities. For, to tell the simple truth, she had not thought of marrying. All things considered, as she said to herself, it was scarcely likely that she should find a partner in the station of life to which she had become accustomed during the ten years of her widowhood; and to find one beneath it she was not minded. She could do without much that many women prize, so long as she was received as an equal amongst

well-bred people, and had a small amount of authority in her own hands, such as had been her portion during the very comfortable years which she spent as housekeeper to Mr. Fledborough before Mrs. Polemont was married. Indeed, something of that kind was what she looked forward to now, after the month or two more which, without appearing to be intrusive, she could pass in the doctor's house. And it had just occurred to her that possibly Mr. Aubury, now that Linnet was growing up, might be willing to accept her services as companion, or something of that kind, at a small yearly salary.

But to go to Florey Castle as Mrs. Aubury, with all the position and prestige that being Mrs. Aubury involved, Maria Plummersleigh had never so much as dreamt of *that*.

She was not a weak woman. She had been too much left to her own resources to be anything of the sort. A woman

who has succeeded for ten years, without help of kith or kin, or, what is sometimes better than both, a well-filled purse, in keeping herself up to the level of tolerably good society ; who, during all that time, has had little of either love or affection bestowed upon her, and has been as little called upon to bestow it upon others, save for hire, may be cold, and uninteresting, and self-contained, but she is not weak. Mrs. Plummersleigh had never, since she first became known in Broadminster, laid herself open to the ridicule invited by those who too readily proclaim their willingness to enter a second time upon the holy estate of matrimony. Abbot's Florey itself, whose eyes were something like those of a fly for range of vision and minuteness of observation, had never yet been able to say of Mrs. Polemont's visitor that she "put herself in the way" of anyone. And now, as a result of that very quietness, discretion, and unobtru-

siveness, she had been asked to become the mistress of Florey Castle.

It was the “all things considered” which kept Mrs. Plummersleigh awake for some time after the ordnance survey of her good fortune had been completed.

For there were things to be considered which neither Mrs. Polemont, nor the doctor, nor the vicar, nor the vicar’s wife, nor anyone in Abbot’s Florey, knew anything about; and the question with Mrs. Plummersleigh was, whether it would be, not to say honourable, but advisable, to marry Mr. Aubury without telling him something about them.

And, after turning the matter over for some time in her own mind, Mrs. Plummersleigh decided that there was no necessity to say anything about them. In marriage a man and woman took each other just as they were. That was how she had taken the late Mr. Plummersleigh, though she could not say it had

turned out satisfactorily, but that was his fault, for having kept back a great deal as to his previous character which ought to have been brought forward. Now she had nothing to keep back in the way of character. She was proud to say that she had always done her duty and kept herself uprightly in that station of life to which it had pleased Providence to call her, though hard enough and humiliating the station had been, sometimes. However much Mr. Aubury inquired, he would never find out that she had been other than a well-conducted, respectable woman, and with that he might be content. So she made up her mind to leave matters as they were.

Then about Linnet.

She must confess to herself that she had not much in common with young people, and especially with young people so much out of the conventional track as Mr. Aubury's sister. But still she felt she

could be of incalculable service to such a girl, in showing her how to frame her thoughts, and words, and ways upon more suitable models. And, if there was anything in what Mrs. Polemont had said——

Here Mrs. Plummersleigh's thoughts swept over a very wide circuit. It was unpleasant to find that this young Mr. Moriston, who was evidently hanging about after Linnet, knew anything of Airdrie Muir, and still more so that he fancied he knew anything about herself. For him to marry into Mr. Aubury's family, with the information he might possibly be able to bring, would be excessively annoying. Indeed Mrs. Plummersleigh felt that it must not be allowed. And she by no means agreed with Mrs. Polemont that it would not be a handsome thing towards young Moriston to bring Mr. Burstborough upon the scene, if by doing so Linnet could be induced to feel an interest in him instead of the Scottish student.

Besides, looking at the matter from an entirely impersonal point of view, what could be more unsatisfactory than a long engagement between young people who had neither prospects nor fortune? young people who had not on the one side energy to carve out a position in life, nor, on the other, experience to meet the inevitable pinching and pressing of small means, and whose love for each other would therefore probably wear itself out after a few years, when the first romance had passed away. If Mr. Aubury was a sensible man, he would see that when it was pointed out to him. And, if not, perhaps her own sensibleness would be sufficient for both.

And, having reflected thus far, Mrs. Plummersleigh fell asleep.

CHAPTER II.

“YOU will not feel lonely, Linnet,” her brother had said, as he buttoned that drab overcoat, through which Mr. Flowerdale’s quick eyes had discerned the scrap of evening dress.

“Not a bit, brother Owen. I shall most likely go down to the dingle and fish.”

“All right. Put on your hat, and we will walk together as far as I go. I shall cut across the seventeen acre and then there will be time to walk leisurely.”

So they started, Linnet with her fishing-tackle and basket, and with a good hope

far down in her happy, love-laden little heart that Keith Moriston would be there too.

"I should not have left you, child, but I have a rather important matter to attend to to-night ; something which I hope will turn out for your comfort as well as mine."

"Indeed, brother Owen ! What is it ?"

"Well, I don't think I ought to tell you, Linnet, until it is really settled ; but I have no doubt to-morrow I shall be able to say something about it. I have asked Mrs. Polemont to allow me the opportunity of an interview with Mrs. Plummersleigh. I have been wondering for some time how I could secure it, and I thought at last the best plan was to write and ask for one. So she has kindly invited me to dine there."

"Yes," said Linnet, vaguely, and straining her eyes across the hazel brake to search for Keith Moriston's straw hat

amongst the bushes on the other side of the pool.

She felt like a guilty creature when her brother spoke the name which was always now lying so quietly in her thoughts. If he had turned and looked upon her then, he would have seen a rose-red flush upon her cheek, which no warm summer sunset glow, striking up from behind the moorlands, could have kindled there. But he did not turn.

"I shouldn't wonder if Moriston is down at the pools. I tell him he may come when he likes, and I think he pretty often does. If he is there, you will be all right. And you might go across afterwards to Miss Alvisa's. I will call for you there as I come home. I may have something to say to her. Now we are at the seventeen acre gate, and I believe I see Moriston on the other side of the pool. Good-bye for the present. Mind you take care of yourself."

With that Owen Aubury sprang over the stile, and was soon sauntering leisurely across the yellowing corn-fields to the turnpike road, leaving Linnet to go on alone, with beating heart and lingering yet longing footsteps, to the cool, pleasant shadows of the dingle.

But it was not Keith Moriston on the other side of the pool, as Linnet's quick eyes soon told her. It was somebody with altogether a more brisk and wide-awake air about him; and she had not gone many steps through the hazel brake before she was near enough to know the stranger for Mr. Burstborough.

Mr. Burstborough was a railway contractor in Broadminster, a sharp, active, well-to-do man who had lately built himself a handsome house in the suburbs of the city, and fitted it up, too, so completely and expensively that, as he said, with a not unreasonable self-complacence, it wanted nothing but a wife to make it perfect.

And this want, he told his friends, he meant to supply as speedily as possible.

He was frequently to be seen about Abbot's Florey, having taken a little cottage in the village, chiefly for the sake of the fishing, which was very good in the valley below the moorlands. So Linnet knew him by sight, though she had never spoken to him, her brother rarely calling upon new-comers. And she knew, too, that he was a man of considerable standing, and moderately well-bred and gentlemanly, and that both the vicar and Dr. Polemont were intimate with him, and that, therefore, she must behave to him with proper respect; though how he came there sitting and fishing so comfortably on the very bit of bank to which Keith Moriston generally found his way was a puzzle.

Linnet thought the best thing she could do was to walk quietly past, not taking any notice, and then turn down a little

side path and into the seventeen-acre, fishing with Mr. Burstborough not being an amusement she cared for. But seeing her, he raised his hat politely.

Linnet looked inquiringly at him.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I am afraid I am trespassing. I was really not aware that these are private grounds. I did not see any notice put up at the gate."

"No," said Linnet, courteously, for she had very much mended her manners towards strangers since that encounter with Keith Moriston, "my brother does not put a notice up, and I am sure he would not object to your fishing if you like."

Linnet said this with an effort, because for her own part she *did* object, and that strongly; but her brother, who did not care for the fishing himself, and who scarcely ever went down to the pools, preferring the breezier fields on the upper part of the farm, had told her that re-

spectable people were not to be interfered with. And Mr. Burstborough certainly was respectable.

Certainly also he did not appear as if he intended to be interfered with. He had made a slight movement, but only a very slight one, towards gathering up his tackle, just enough to intimate that he was ready to go, but a great deal more ready to stay if the opportunity offered.

Linnet felt confused. She began to trifle with her own rod and line, and succeeded in getting it into a very sufficient tangle.

“Pray allow me, Miss Aubury.”

And Mr. Burstborough, who was not troubled with shyness, sprang across a narrow bit of the stream and offered his services in winding up the line. Or unwinding it, which would have been more to his own satisfaction, as then, even if he could not have stayed on the spot, he could have strolled a little way up the

moor, and seated himself to watch her there by the pool. And a very pretty picture she made, whether one watched her near or far off, Mr. Burstborough thought. He had only as yet seen her in church, sitting by her grave-looking brother in the castle pew, close up by the pulpit, and he had not seen her there many Sundays before he had made up his mind that she was far away the fairest little maiden in the church, and that, fortune or no fortune—for, as Mrs. Polemont had said, Mr. Burstborough was not a mean man—he would do what he could to secure her as a completing touch to that beautiful new house of his in the suburbs of Broadminster. As yet he had been able to do very little in such a direction, on account of the persistent shyness of Mr. Aubury; but here was an introduction, at any rate, and one which he was determined to follow up.

Only Linnet appeared to be as shy as

her brother, so very different from most of the Broadminster young ladies, who, as a rule, were quite ready to accept his polite attentions. With the prettiest little surprise and hesitation just evident in her manner, she drew her fishing-tackle away and said,

“Thank you. I—I don’t think I want to fish to-night. It is rather too close. You have not caught much yourself, have you?”

And she looked at his empty basket.

“Well, not a great deal,” he replied, “but I enjoy the amusement all the same, only I am so exceedingly sorry to have trespassed upon private grounds. Of course I knew that the land about here belongs to Mr. Aubury, but I had been told that he does not preserve the fishing.”

“And he doesn’t. Oh! please don’t be uncomfortable about it,” said Linnet,

kindly anxious to save a stranger from the feeling of annoyance she would herself have had under the same circumstances. "I am sure, if you were to ask my brother, he would tell you that you might come whenever you liked."

Though what an intolerable bore if he should, thought Linnet, as from a conscientious sense of duty she thus expressed herself. Still she knew her brother would have done just the same if he had been there.

Mr. Burstborough bowed. If that did not mean making the way open for him to call at the castle, he should like to know what it did mean. And, even if a note would have been enough for asking permission to fish the pools, he had another excuse now for presenting his card, namely, the apology, which, though by no means necessary for what was really an unintentional intrusion, would now be a

most convenient key to the door of the intimacy which he was fully minded to cultivate. Things could not have fallen out more fortunately.

"I shall go this way, thank you," said Linnet. "I am on my way to Miss Clerehart. She lives close by the church."

And Linnet, gathering her tackle together, moved towards the stile at the end of the dingle.

"Pray allow me to help you."

And with ready politeness Mr. Burstborough flung down his rod, thereby losing a big pike which was just rising for a bite. But Linnet had sprung over the stile before he could reach it, and, with a half-amused smile at his astonishment, she bowed to him and was out of sight in a moment, leaving the disconcerted angler to go back to his own meditations.

Which meditations brought him to the conclusion that before another twenty-four hours had passed he would present himself

at the castle, and see what could be done towards establishing at any rate a comfortable calling acquaintance there.

CHAPTER III.

LINNET was conscious of a curious mixture of feelings as she went across to Miss Alvisa's. Keith Moriston knew that she would most likely be down at the pools, and yet he had not cared to go. That ruffled the sweetness of her temper. Then this Mr. Burstborough had shown himself so very anxious to be polite, had looked so comically rueful when she sprang over the stile instead of waiting for him to help her, had gone back to his rod and his pike with such crestfallen quietness. That made her feel coquettish — a quite new feeling for Linnet, and one

as delightful just now as it was new. She had had a little of the same feeling at that afternoon dance, specially with one very romantic young lieutenant who made some foolish speeches to her during an interminable quadrille; but then everything was so fresh and strange, and almost before she was clearly conscious of any new sensation another as new chased it away, to be in its own turn extinguished by a third, until she became almost bewildered by the entirely different life which was opening out before her. But since then another, so much sweeter, had opened. That afternoon at Broadmister, which left at the time so vivid an impression, had sunk far away down into what was now an almost forgotten past. She never even thought about it, except to make it a date from which to reckon something so much better, more memorable.

And never again until now, with the thought of Mr. Burstborough's very demon-

strative politeness fresh in her mind, and the little roughness of Keith Moriston's apparent negligence fresh in it too, had she had that mischievous feeling of satisfaction with the effect she could produce upon other people, that sort of coquettish delight in being able, first to interest, and then to disappoint them. Probably she would not have had it at all, if Keith had been down there at the pools; for her love for him, though unspoken and unacknowledged, had gone deeply enough into her heart to make her sweetly forgetful in his presence of all others. What they might wish to be to her, what she might be to them, had no interest for her. There was her own beautiful hope apart from them all. Nay, as yet she had scarcely asked herself whether what she gave so freely was returned. It was enough to give it, to have its sunlight, unknown to any but herself, drawing out her whole

being into beauty, and blossom, and sweet-
ness. But Keith Moriston had not been at
the pools, and that made all the difference.

“Brother Owen told me I had better
come,” she said, seeing both Miss Alvisa
and the young student in the old vicarage
garden as she reached the gate.

For at any time now, and much more
when she might seem to be seeking Mr.
Moriston, instead of his seeking her, she
liked to have an excuse for appearing
there. But he need not think that his
coming or not coming was a matter of so
very much importance, and therefore she
took scarcely any notice of him as she kiss-
ed Miss Alvisa, and then proceeded to
curl herself up in the old swing, just with-
in reach of the couch.

“You are welcome, child, whoever told
you to come,” said Miss Alvisa. “But
you are not often going about all alone at
this time of the evening.”

“ Brother Owen is dining at Mrs. Polemont’s.”

“ Poor brother Owen then! Not because he is dining at Mrs. Polemont’s, but because he is dining anywhere than at home.”

“ Well, yes, it generally *is* poor brother Owen when he has to dine out, but he didn’t seem to think he was at all to be pitied to-night. And it is not a party.”

“ But why are you left behind?”

“ Because I wasn’t asked,” said Linnet, demurely.

“ That was too bad. But never mind, I will not find fault with anything that brings you here. Now put away your fishing tackle. I am sure that doesn’t look as if you had intended to come.”

Linnet looked resolutely away from Keith Moriston, lying there almost close to her feet, as she accounted for the rod and line.

“ I did mean to have stopped a little

while at the pools, and brother Owen walked down with me nearly as far, and he told me when I had done fishing I had better come on here. But when we got near the pools there was some one else there, so I did not like to stay."

"Of course not. Here, Keith, take Miss Aubury's things away, and lay them safely in the hall. I don't like fish-hooks about on my lawn."

Keith gathered up, first his own long length from the grass, and then Linnet's rod and line, taking care, however, that the hook should get fast in her dress, and so give him an excuse for spending a good five minutes in setting it free. Then he strolled away with the things. Keith was never in a hurry, and it seemed to Linnet that he took an unnecessarily long time in depositing her belongings in a place of safety.

"Brother Owen said if you would let me stay here for an hour or two, he would

call for me on his way back from Dr. Polemont's house. I don't think he will be very late, for he said no one would be there but himself. Indeed he asked Mrs. Polemont to ask him, because he said he wanted very much to see Mrs. Plummersleigh about something."

Just a change passed over Miss Alvisa's peaceful face. Was Mrs. Plummersleigh, then, to be the lady-companion, or something probably more permanent than that? For, though few and far between were the webs of gossip that floated into the old house by the church, that particular one had found its way there. Mrs. Flowerdale had said what she thought about the new engagement that either had been made, or would very shortly be made, in the village. And little Mrs. Polemont, though she had not gone quite so far, still could not keep herself from hinting that something of the kind was more than likely to happen. So that Miss Alvisa was prepared. But did

she need any preparation now? Had not Owen Aubury himself told her what was in his thoughts? Told her very gently, and with a lingering regret, but told her so that she could not mistake his meaning. All was in the past now that had once been real and actual for them both.

But she was not one to say much about it. She had felt that a change ought to come, and that it would come sooner or later, and that her own words had perhaps brought it about now. Still that did not take anything from the pang with which she listened to the child's simple, unconscious explanation. It would be Linnet, and Linnet only, who would come very often to the old vicarage by-and-by.

"Brother Owen said he would have asked Mrs. Plummersleigh to come and keep me company, only, of course, as he was going principally to talk to her, that would be no use."

"Of course not. But I did not know

you were very intimate with Mrs. Plummersleigh."

"Well, I don't think I am. We have all been for walks two or three times, but Mrs. Polemont comes too, and she generally walks with me, whilst Mrs. Plummersleigh keeps with brother Owen. She tells him about the flowers and things, you know, because Mrs. Polemont says she is so very fond of botany. I don't care about botany a bit."

Miss Alvisa did not know that Mr. Aubury did either.

"I think I will go in now," she said, feeling that she was becoming, quite innocently, a receptacle for information never intended to reach her; feeling, too, that something was coming into her life which she would rather face, as she faced most other bitter things, in solitude.

So Keith Moriston and Linnet were left there alone together under the old beech-tree, alone whilst the twilight fell and the

full yellow moon crept slowly up behind the old church tower ; and there brooded around them that waiting silence which, but for Linnet's little touch of offended pride, dashing her manner towards him with the faintest hint of disdain, might have been broken only by the telling of his love.

But Keith was feeling a little offended, too, because she was so quiet, and because, as he stooped over her such a needlessly long time to disentangle that fishing-tackle from her dress, she had held herself so stiffly apart from him, not even letting her eyes meet his, or a single word betray that she was taking any notice of his intention in loitering over the pleasant work. For, as she thought, he had not been so very anxious, after all, to see her, or he would have gone down to the swan-pools.

“ And so you didn't have any fishing to-night,” he began, after a long and rather uncomfortable pause, during which Linnet,

with her dainty little feet crossed, had been idly swaying to and fro in the swing, and catching the beech-tree leaves in her mouth and making notches in them, and then trying to hit the same ones again, which she could never do. But still she made a pretty enough picture in the attempt.

"No. I think I said there was some one there when I went down."

"You did say so. And I hope you behaved politely to him," remarked Keith, mischievously. "You do not always do so, you know."

But Linnet would not acknowledge that awkward little episode. She was not going back just now upon anything which should make her conscious of Keith Moriston's power over her. It was the other side of the question she preferred looking at to-night.

"Yes," she replied, with a sauciness which rather disappointed poor Keith,

looking as he did for the flushing cheeks and downcast eyes, which any reference to the manner of their first acquaintance had hitherto produced. "I was so polite that I told him I was sure brother Owen would be very glad for him to come again if he liked. Was that polite enough?"

"Oh, quite! In fact, I should say it was rather more than necessary. And pray, who is the happy recipient of so much favour?"

"He is a Mr. Burstborough, and that is almost all I can tell you about him at present; he has taken a little cottage here for the summer and autumn, chiefly for the fishing, I think."

"Unless it is more chiefly to push himself where he is not wanted. If you had stared him out of countenance, Miss Aubury, I should have said you had done exactly the right thing. Didn't I hear some one talking about him the other day? A man who has been successful in

some great contracts, and says he should like to buy up Abbot's Florey, if the land were to sell."

"I don't know about his buying up Abbot's Florey, but he was very polite and made a great many apologies for intruding, and so I was obliged to tell him that I was sure brother Owen would not mind it. You see, when people are only staying a little while it makes a difference."

"Yes. I see it makes this difference, that they are a great deal more cheeky and disagreeable."

"*You* are not staying very long, are you, Mr. Moriston?"

"I hope I am staying long enough to teach you to mend your manners, Miss Linnet."

"Then I am afraid you will have to stay a very long time, for I do not so much as know that they want mending yet, and Miss Alvisa tells me we must

always be conscious of our faults before we can feel any desire to amend them."

Linnet said this with the most provoking indifference, just tilting forward her pretty head and parting her white teeth to catch the beech-tree leaves, as she swung herself there under the drooping branches. Keith thought he had never seen her look* so bright and bonnie, and yet somehow she seemed to be slipping away from him. Hitherto he had looked upon her as fair for himself alone ; now the unwelcome thought was forcing itself upon him that she might be fair for some one else.

"Miss Alvisa told you a very wise thing. But she might have gone farther, and said that to know your faults you must have a friend faithful enough to tell you of them, and I mean to be that friend."

"Thank you very much. You might have come down to the swan-pools to-night, then, and told me about them."

And the little curl of pettishness on Linnet's lip told how and why she had been offended. Keith was triumphant again. So she did care for him enough to look for his coming, and to be disappointed when he did not come. That was more than he had almost dared to hope. And if his not going down to the swan-pools that night had brought that little touch of saucy defiance to her manner, he could easily drive it away again.

"Miss Linnet, don't cut up rough like that. Do you know I really did come, and I thought I should have had ever such a pleasant time, only, when I got there, I saw some other fellow hulking about amongst the bushes, and I thought perhaps he was somebody you had invited, and I didn't care to stay. I am quite sure, if you knew how disappointed I was, you wouldn't keep on being so tiresome. Haven't I made it right now?"

And Keith lazily stretched out his long

arm to stop the swing, for Linnet, though with a thrill of happiness at her heart, was still taking not so much as a bit of notice of him. She seemed to have no thought but for catching the beech-tree leaves, and leaving the marks of her little white teeth upon them.

"Come, come, now, Miss Linnet, do be sensible. If you don't talk to me nicely, I shall just take you and the swing and put you right up in the tree, and then come down again if you can."

For answer Linnet only took firm hold of the ropes and gave a splendid spring, which sent her high enough to show Keith that, if she did want to be up amongst the branches, she could get there without his help. But, as she was swinging back again, one of the ropes gave way, and she fell down on the grass, lying there so still and quiet, and with face so white, that Keith was frightened.

Making haste enough now, he lifted

her up and laid her on the rug which was always spread beside Miss Alvisa's couch.

"Oh! Linnet, my poor little birdie, what have you done?" he said, holding her tightly to him for a little while, and kissing the bright curly head before he laid it gently down, with his arm for its pillow. "Speak, poor little one, and tell me if you are very much hurt."

"I am not hurt at all," said Linnet, gravely, opening her eyes after awhile. "I was only very much frightened, and I did not know where I was. Please let me get up."

"No, I shan't. Just you lie still there, and I will fetch you some water."

Which Keith Moriston did, in much less time than it had taken him to deposit the fishing-tackle in the hall. When he came back, Linnet was up and pacing about on the grass as though nothing had happened, only a little paler and quieter than usual.

But, as he looked into her face now, they each knew for each other what before they had only known for themselves. There was no more teasing after that.

“Let us go to Miss Alvisa,” said Linnet. And they went round to her open window, where she lay thinking her own thoughts in the now almost dimness of the August evening. And they were still talking with her there when Mr. Aubury came up to the little gate.

“Are you ready, Linnet?”

“Yes, quite.”

“Then come away. Tell Miss Alvisa that I shall most likely look in to-morrow morning.”

“No,” said Miss Alvisa, quietly, “let it be now. Come in now.”

“Then, Moriston, will you go home with Linnet? It is getting late.”

“All right,” said Keith, very cheerfully. And as he gathered up Linnet’s belong-

ings and took her under his care, Mr. Aubury went in to tell Miss Alvisa what that quiet evening had done for him.

CHAPTER IV.

“I ALMOST think I know,” she said, as he entered the room.

For answer he came and sat beside her, and took her hand as he had taken it many and many a time before, for welcome or farewell. Only this time he did not let it go, and Miss Alvisa did not take it back. And his face, as she could see it in that uncertain light, had not the joy of a man for whom at last some great hope is fulfilled. Rather it had the steadfast calm of one who has let the joy go, and yet feels that he has done well.

“It is Mrs. Plummersleigh, Owen.”

“Yes.”

“And she is to be your wife.”

“Yes.”

Just a tremor through the fingers which Owen Aubury held, just one look in the face which slowly turned away from him, told how falsely he had judged this woman, whose love, he thought, had wearied.

But it was too late now. And he could not give her any comfort, if so indeed her womanly heart could have taken any, by telling her how it had all come to pass; how little, how almost less than nothing he had to give to the woman who was to be his wife; and yet how all that was tender and chivalrous in his nature bound him to the sacrifice he had made, and also bound him to keep it a sacrifice for ever unacknowledged. Not even to justify himself to the woman he loved, dare he humiliate that other whose happiness he had now taken into his own keeping. None but himself

must know at what a cost he had done what he thought was right.

"I suppose it must have come, sooner or later," Miss Alvisa said, letting his hand go. "And perhaps—well, I will try to think it is better so."

Owen Aubury leaned wearily forward, covering his face.

"It is I, Alvisa, who have to try to think that. It was my mistake. I thought—well, I thought the years had been too long for you. They had not been too long for me. God knows they had not been too long for me. And now I know they had not been too long for you either."

Almost a glory flashed into Alvisa Clerehart's eyes for just one moment, and then died away. So then he did know. But at what a cost to both of them had he learned it. And yet to know that a love is nobly and purely put aside, not dead, but only slumbering until its resurrection time,—if

this be sad, there are other things far sadder.

"We have read each other wrongly, Owen, and now we must both suffer for it. But it is only for life, and it is not all of life to live. Besides, you have one more to make happy now. That is something. Now go. I want to be alone and think."

"So do I. Good-bye, Alvisa."

Again he bent over her and kissed her forehead.

"I said good-bye to you, Alvisa, a month ago, but it was not such a good-bye as this."

She smiled brightly up into his face, such a brightness as sunset before short summer night.

"No, Owen, it was a much sadder good-bye than this. That was good-bye to faith and trust. This is good-bye to the little bit of daylight that might be left to us on this side the grave. And afterwards there is all the rest to be happy in."

“Still it *is* good-bye,” he said, and so went out from her little room into the silent night.

Whilst they two watched the light go down, Keith Moriston and Linnet, walking side by side up the dingle path, watched theirs rising to its happy dawn.

It was but a step from the old vicarage to the castle gates which opened upon that bit of foot-road ; and, once within them, Linnet would have been safe enough. Or the step might be made into many, by going a little farther down the road, and entering by the gate near the swan-pools, in which case the dingle path, with its many windings and doublings, had to be traced before the house was reached. And this was the way Keith Moriston chose.

As they were nearing this gate, they met Mr. Burstborough, who had evidently been in no hurry to quit his pleasant quarters. Recognizing him, Linnet would have taken

away her hand from the shelter of Mr. Moriston's arm, but that was not to be allowed.

"I don't see why, Linnet," he said. "If it is Mr. Burstborough, he is quite welcome to know that I am taking care of you."

And so, letting Linnet have the shyness to herself this time, he walked her past the wealthy young contractor so closely that there could be no mistake about the identity of any of the three.

"There then, Linnet," he said. "I don't think he will come fishing here so comfortably another time. If he does, I shall ask your brother to have a board put up, giving notice that trespassers are warned off the premises."

Linnet made no reply. This feeling of being taken possession of and guarded so jealously, was very pleasant. And yet she would rather not have met Mr. Burstborough just at that time. What he thought of her, the impression she could

produce upon him, had alike become of so little importance. Two or three hours ago, and under other circumstances, she might have had a sort of teasing delight in letting him see that there was no necessity for his very demonstrative politeness. But now everything was so different. So strangely and sweetly had that little moment, during which she and Keith Moriston looked into each other's eyes, parted between her and all of her past life, making it seem far off and of no account.

So they came down to the swan-pools, where now the moonlight shot in silver streaks through the laurel branches, and the tall flag-leaves glistened like shining pointed spears all along the water's edge; and as they came to a bit of willow-stump, gnarled and mossy, which overhung the pool, Keith Moriston stayed.

"Linnet," he said, "it was just here that I was sitting with my books when you came down that little bit of path on the other

side, and looked at me. And I knew then what I know now, Linnet, and what will be true for me all the days until I die."

Linnet's eyes, just flashing towards him for a moment, seemed to ask what that was.

"It was that Linnet's face was the fairest face I had ever seen, and that, if ever I married at all, Linnet should be my wife."

Keith Moriston drew her a little nearer to him, as they two stood there by the mossy willow-stump, and she did not gather herself away from him this time; and for just one happy moment they rested, heart to heart, with no thought but of their own exceeding joy. It was that moment which comes but once in any life, when the light of loving and being loved breaks in upon the young heart which holds no memory of any other. And there may come deeper content, and there may come purer blessedness, and there may come a diviner rest, but there never comes again in all the life

of man or woman a joy so keen, and clear, and absolute as that.

Keith said no more. Hand in hand, he and Linnet came up the dingle-path, too happy for any other speech than that mute hand clasp in which he told, and she let him tell, so much. And so they reached the old black archway leading into the courtyard of the castle, not gloomy now nor dark, for the moonlight lay broadly upon it, bringing out in fair relief the soft tracery-work of leaf and lichen which many a year had embroidered there.

“I am not going away, Linnet, until your brother comes home. I want to see him. Let us sit out here and wait.”

“And, no, I am not going to have you cry off like that,” he continued, making her keep her place close beside him, as old Martlet, hearing footsteps, came from within to inquire ; and Linnet, with a little touch of maidenly pride, was drawing herself away. “I shall not have so very much

time now. Lord Stormont may send for me any day, and then there will be no more walks and talks for us. I wish you would tell me, Linnet, that you will miss me."

"Yes."

"Very much?"

"Yes, very much."

"Linnet I wonder if I should ask you now ——"

There were footsteps on the gravel walk, and Mr. Aubury came in sight.

"I am glad you have waited, Moriston," he said. "I have been rather longer than I expected, and I was afraid Linnet would be lonely. I have been strolling up and down the road, and the time has gone faster than I thought."

And then, seeing that Keith seemed inclined to make for the courtyard, he added, shaking hands with him,

"I would ask you to come in, but I have many things to think over, and I am very tired. Good night."

That was a disappointment, for Keith had made up his mind to ask the master of Florey Castle for half an hour's conversation with him about Linnet, before ever going back again to the old house by the church. And the time might be short now.

“But I will come to-morrow morning,” he said to himself, as, with a world of sweet dreams in his heart, he retraced his steps down the dingle path to Miss Alvisa.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN he reached the house there was a telegram awaiting him from Lord Stormont. They were starting for the Continent earlier than they expected, and he must be ready to join them in London next morning.

That involved going up by the night mail. Keith wrote a note to Mr. Aubury, telling him of his hasty departure, and sending such a message as he could frame for Linnet. To herself he dared not write, yet she would surely remember him as faithfully as he remembered her, until such time as he could honourably claim her from her brother.

And by midnight he was far on his way to King's Cross.

Tidy brought the note as Mr. Aubury sat in the dim old chapel-room alone, meditating over some of the "many things" which he had truly said needed to be thought about. He read it and put it aside, soon forgetting all that it contained, the message to Linnet included. Keith's going away was a matter of little moment to him, though the young fellow's society had been pleasant enough in its way, nor did he suspect that Linnet's life would be any poorer for it. There were comings and goings now of far other importance, with which he was bound to concern himself; goings, like uncourteously dismissed guests, of the tender memories and associations which had dwelt with him so long; incomings, not indeed of new hopes, for of these there were none, but of new duties, new interests, which might in time bring a sort of satisfaction with them.

Until the little morning hours he sat there, thinking. Life had indeed strangely changed for him too. A portcullis had been dropped between his present and his past, as strong as that which parted Linnet now from the careless years of her childhood. Only that it set her in the enchanted land of hope, from which no memory yet had leave to call her; while through its bars he looked back to all that could ever be real to him of peace.

There was but one ray of light on the dreary road before him, and that came from Miss Alvisa's words—

“ You have one more life to make happy now.”

A woman in whom he had found pleasant and estimable qualities had, through mistaken words of his, been betrayed into confessing a love for him which made her content to place her whole future life in his keeping. With an impulse, which he yet felt to be right, he had taken upon himself

the responsibility of that mistake, giving up his own future to protect her from humiliation. And the only content he had now was in his resolution to make her happy, to shield her good name. She should never know, nor should any other, that what she received henceforth as her due had been given by him at the first unwittingly. The confidence which, unasked indeed, yet, as she imagined, most honourably sought by him, she had given, should be as honourably guarded, and, whatever he had to suffer in the guarding, should be suffered silently.

There came into his heart, as he thought over all these things, the dawn of that quiet which never fails to come, sooner or later, to those for whom the rights of others, not their own, have the first place. With it there came a tenderness, born of pity, towards this woman whom he had so unconsciously deceived, to whom he could never return what with such implicit trust she had given him. He could not love her, but he

could surround her life with care and kindness. She could never be the one woman out of all the world whose touch and smile could wake a thrill of sympathy within him ; but she could be the sharer of his worldly goods, the bearer of his name ; and by all that thoughtfulness of his could suggest he would strive to make up to her for the lack of that which, unknown to her, had long ago gone whence it could not be recalled.

And Linnet would be the gainer. He had done some good to her, too, if he had beggared himself of even that scant share of happiness which the years had left him out of his once full portion.

Next morning, Linnet, with a world of dreamy hope and longing in her brown eyes, sat beside him. She had never had thoughts before that she could not tell to him. Now, what a paradise lay around her, but girded in by silence. As yet it was for herself alone, and Keith.

"Linnet," said her brother, as he looked away through the mullioned window of the chapel-room to the elm-trees which sheltered the doctor's house. "Linnet, I have something to say to you."

Linnet's heart gave one quick bound, and then she shut her eyes over happy dreams. It could but be of one that brother Owen was going to speak. But Keith's was not the name that came.

"Linnet, it is right that you should know at once. It is very much on your account that it is going to take place at all, and I hope it will supply to you much that you need. I am to be married, Linnet. And Mrs. Plummersleigh is to be your elder sister. She will be as a mother to you."

Linnet looked at him. She could not quite comprehend. Through the mist of hope, which joy's sunlight was drawing up from her heart, all things seemed unreal.

"Going to be married, brother Owen?"

"Yes, Linnet child. And, I think, very

soon. You will have a companion now, Linnet. You will be able to go out as much as you like."

And there was just a touch of tender reproof in his tone, which Linnet felt through all her joy. Going up, and kissing him, she said,

"Brother Owen, it is not going out that I care for. I am very happy with you."

"Not going out that you care for, Linnet? Why, how glad you were when I told you you might go with Mrs. Polemont to that afternoon dance."

"That dance? Oh! yes, but that was such a long time ago. Things are so different now."

"Not such a long time ago, Linnet; only a month. And how are things different?"

"It seems a great deal longer than a month, brother Owen. It seems more like this time last year. Such a great deal has happened."

"Happened?"

Linnet coloured and turned her face quickly away.

“ Well, perhaps not such a great deal. Anyhow, I don’t care so much for going out. The dance was not so very pleasant, after all. And I am very happy with you. But, if it is going to make you more comfortable, it is all right. Mrs. Plummers-leigh has always been very nice and kind to me.”

“ She has, Linnet. I have noticed that. And I think it has been from her heart. And you must do all you can to make her feel that you love her.”

“ Oh ! yes, brother Owen, of course. I won’t get in her way at all, and I will try not to give her any trouble. I am sure we shall do very nicely together. It is a pity I don’t care for fancy-work and botany, but I daresay she will teach me a great many other things besides.”

“ I hope so. And, Linnet, I should like you to call upon her as soon as you can, and

tell her—well, tell her that you are very glad."

"Of course I will," said Linnet, readily. "I will tell her that I am ever so glad. When am I to go?"

"I should like you to go to-day, Linnet."

Linnet's countenance fell. It was to-day that Keith Moriston said he should come over again. And there might be so few days now, in which he could come, before Lord Stormont would want him.

"I am going over to Mrs. Polemont's this morning," Mr. Aubury continued. "There are yet many things to be arranged. And I should like to tell Mrs. Plummersleigh that you will call upon her this afternoon. I wish you to show her every possible mark of respect."

"Oh ! yes, I am sure I will do that. It will not be any trouble at all to me to do that. But, you know, brother Owen——"

Linnet hesitated, then went on bravely.

Because of course brother Owen did not know anything. She was only betraying herself by being so foolish.

" You know, Mr. Moriston said perhaps he would come in to-day some time. And he would be so disappointed not to see you."

" Oh! no, Linnet. Moriston will not be likely to come. He sent in a note last night to say he had had a telegram from the Stormonts. They want him to join them at once for the Continent, so he started by the evening mail, and I should think they are all well on their way to Paris by this time. I shall go over to Mrs. Polemont's before luncheon, and I shall say that you will call some time this afternoon. It will be all right."

And Mr. Aubury never said anything about the message which Keith had worded so carefully, thinking that every syllable of it would speak to Linnet's heart of his great though unspoken love for her. It had said

nothing of that sort to brother Owen, and brother Owen had far other things to think of now.

CHAPTER VI.

LINNET felt all at once so cold and desolate. At eighteen one looks for happiness as a sort of vested right, and anything which interferes with it is a crime against the natural order of things. Of course, as she said to herself when, after hearing of his departure, she strolled out into the garden, of course Keith could not help being sent for in that way. When people are tutors to lords' sons, they have to do as the lords tell them ; but he might have sent her a message of some sort. She had pride enough to feel that she was entitled to that little attention. But perhaps he had said something to Miss Alvisa.

And there Linnet's pride came in again. No, she could not ask. She would not say anything about it at all. Perhaps he meant to write a regular long letter by-and-by and explain why he had gone away without sending any message to her. Still she might go to Miss Alvisa. There could be no harm in that. And she would go either on her way to or from the doctor's house, so as not to make a purposed visit of it.

She could settle down to nothing. All the little interests which had filled up her life before seemed so poor and meaningless now. Snip came whining up for a scamper after the squirrels—a rare luxury for the poor fellow of late—but Linnet only stooped down and caressed his curly head : squirrel-hunting had lost its charms. And so also had the once delightful employment of hiding a bit of bread in the paddock, and watching Bobtail's patient search for it, an occupation which not so very long ago had speeded the flight of many a summer morning, both

for herself and the old pony. Snip and Bobtail could never fill up her life again ; and Keith Moriston, who had so quickly won it all to himself, was far away, leaving not even a word for her.

Mrs. Flowerdale came to call, bringing with her the two Miss Levertons, her nieces, who had come to make a long visit, and who, having heard of the historic interest of Florey Castle, would so like to be shown over it. That filled up the time, though not so very pleasantly, until luncheon, and then Linnet strolled away into the dingle, to live over again all that had come to pass for her there only a few hours before.

Ah ! how pleasant it was to remember, to stand by that bit of mossy trunk and recall the words which Keith had spoken to her there, words which had flung open the gates upon such a new world of hope and promise. The soft green stems and fibres of that very moss seemed to be writing the story of her love as they clasped

and traced over the crumbling bark. Linnet read a meaning in every one—the meaning of her own young, trustful heart.

And she was still reading it, when she heard a rustle in the dry last year's leaves, and, looking round, Mr. Burstborough was making his way down from the gate as speedily as might be. Not with his fishing-tackle and basket this time, but evidently bent on calling.

And he made no hesitation in telling her so. Mr. Burstborough was not retiring, and he had small difficulty in expressing his thoughts, and he always had a comfortable sense of being equal to the situation, whatever that situation might be; as, indeed, a man ought to have who could set up his carriage and pair if he felt there was any necessity for doing so. Moreover, there was the comfortable consciousness that all the advantages which reached their climax in the carriage and pair possibility were as yet at his own disposal, a sort of prize for

the possession of which it was only natural that the eligible young ladies of the neighbourhood should feel a respectful longing. Therefore, he never saw a pleasant-faced girl, who was, as he termed it, "on her promotion," without taking for granted that she must be looking upon himself in the light of a possible husband ; and this hypothetical state of mind on the part of his feminine acquaintance, combined with his own conviction that everything a girl could possibly desiderate was brought into a focus in his own person, gave him an air of confidence which some people thought exceedingly attractive.

"I was on my way to the castle," he said, advancing towards Linnet with easy indifference. "I could not feel comfortable until I had apologised to Mr. Aubury for my intrusion last night. I hope you have already interceded for me, or that, if not, you will not refuse to do so."

Linnet looked up at him with dreamy,

wistful gaze, scarcely understanding what he said. Mr. Burstborough interpreted the wistfulness as a tribute to those advantages, both of person and position, which were his own to confer.

"I shall find Mr. Aubury at home, I hope? My housekeeper told me there was a short cut to the castle down this path, and so I availed myself of it."

"It is not very short," said Linnet, simply. "I should think it is just about twice as long, because it twists round so. I will go back with you, if you like, and show you the way. It is rather hard to find by oneself, because there are so many little paths turning out of it. But I am sure there was no need for you to come, if you only want to apologise."

That was as much as to say that, if in addition to the apology, he wished to open the way to a pleasant acquaintance, it would be all right. At any rate, that was how Mr. Burstborough construed Linnet's re-

mark. And so they turned, and went together up the dingle, he chatting politely to her all the way, and making up his mind, if indeed it was not sufficiently made up before, that this silent but so prettily-conscious little maiden would form a desirable finish for his beautiful Broadminster house.

For, after she had once offered him her guidance to the house, Linnet was very silent. And, when her companion made any remark which required a reply, she seemed to have to bring herself back, as if out of a reverie, to give it. That was not unpleasing to him. It showed that he was making an impression, that Miss Aubury was feeling herself a little overpowered by the two or three neatly turned compliments which he contrived to introduce during the course of the walk. Probably she, too, was looking upon him in the light of a possible husband, and mentally calculating her own chances of success amongst the numbers of young ladies who would only

too gladly have accepted the offer of his heart and hand.

And indeed—so he thought within himself as he looked from time to time into her wistful, unquiet face—such an offer was almost more than she might have expected. For though Mr. Aubury was a man of substance, still he was under no obligation to leave any of it to his step-sister. And if, as report said, he was thinking of marriage, Miss Linnet would not find herself in such a very agreeable position. The coming Mrs. Aubury might tolerate her presence at the castle, or she might not. And if she did not, why then a far less eligible partner than himself might be abundantly welcome.

Which reflection, of course, brought even a more than usually comfortable feeling of self-satisfaction to worthy Mr. Burstborough. He felt there was something, after all, noble in his preference for this penniless girl over the well dowered and fashionable young

ladies of Broadminster and elsewhere, who had shown themselves so very ready to meet his advances. It was not every man who would have acted so unselfishly; not every man of his means who would have overlooked in his search for a wife almost all but simplicity, and grace, and fairness, finding in these qualities the prize which others looked for in the more sordid charms of money, or advantageous worldly connection.

Thinking these pleasant thoughts, alternating them with polite and impressive remarks to the shy girl at his side—who all the time was mentally contrasting, much to its disparagement, this walk with that other one only the night before over the same fallen last year's leaves, through the same rustling hazel copse—they reached the door of the castle.

Could it be anything but regret for the ending of a pleasant *tête-à-tête* which made

Linnet say, in a disappointed sort of tone, as she introduced Mr. Burstborough to her brother,

"I shall have to leave you now; for I am going up to call upon Mrs. Plummersleigh."

"Is there *no* time but the present," said Mr. Burstborough, with a pleading look.

"Brother Owen told me I was to go. Good-bye."

And that was all Linnet's answer. But Mr. Burstborough was quite sure, from the manner in which she gave it, that nothing but a feeling of the obedience which she owed to Mr. Aubury would have taken her away just then. And he kindly determined that their next interview should not end so disappointingly for her.

Linnet accomplished her call upon Mrs. Plummersleigh, and then turned into the old vicarage before coming home. The day being bright and sunny, Miss Alvisa was lying as usual on her sofa under the beech-

tree; but there were no books scattered about now, and there was no tall, broad-shouldered Keith Moriston stretched on the grass at her feet, and Linnet felt as if she could have cried. Miss Alvisa, too, looked dispirited. There were dark shadows under her eyes, but that was because she was tired, for of course Keith's going away so unexpectedly must have kept her up late the night before.

"Come in, little one," she said, putting away a pen and ink sketch. "I thought I should see you this morning. You know, I suppose, that I am all alone again."

"Yes. Brother Owen told me Mr. Moriston had been obliged to go away suddenly. A telegram or something."

"Yes. The Stormonts sent for him to start with them from Dover this morning. He was very sorry he could not come to say good-bye to you, but I quite expect he will be back here in about a month. The question of the Calcutta professorship will

be decided then. He will either return to the Stormonts or go out to India."

Miss Alvisa did not seem inclined to say any more. Linnet thought she must be missing Keith's companionship very much. And there was such an unusual dreariness over everything.

Linnet idly rocked herself to and fro in the swing. As she did so, she tilted up against the beech-tree leaves which she had been trying to catch the night before. There were the marks of her little teeth in some of them. Only the night before, and it seemed such a very, very long time. And lying on the mossy ground at the foot of the beech-tree were the blades of grass which Keith Moriston had been braiding together just before he flung them away to lift her up when she fell out of the swing. Why could not things have kept as they were?

"I have been to see Mrs. Plummers-leigh," she said at last, in a rather dreary voice.

Miss Alvisa turned and looked at her inquiringly.

"My brother said I had better go and tell her I was glad to hear about it. You know, brother Owen is going to marry Mrs. Plummersleigh."

"Yes, child, yes; he has told me about it. Linnet, you have a good brother. No one in the world has a better. You must do all you can to make him happy."

Linnet stooped to pick up the woven blades of grass. She smoothed them gently against her cheek. It was a comfort to touch anything which had once been so near to him. And by-and-by the tears began to gather in her eyes.

Miss Alvisa reached out her hand and folded it over Linnet's, thinking the tears were for that change which was so soon to happen in her peaceful home. And for awhile they were both very quiet.

"Be patient, child," she said at last.

“Things will not always come as we like.
And you have a long day before you for
the sunlight to brighten again.”

CHAPTER VII.

DURING the call which Mr. Aubury made at the doctor's house that morning many things were talked over, those particular ones which Mrs. Plummersleigh had so carefully considered before she went to sleep on the previous night not being mentioned amongst them. And at the close of the visit Mr. Aubury, who had galloped over to Broadminster that morning, placed upon her finger a costly ring, and upon her forehead a kiss which cost him very much more than the ring. And in all his bearing towards her there was now a gentle chivalry which lifted her above

the dull level of common-place, and made her feel that she had been somewhat unjustly dealt with, in that it had been withheld from her so long.

For if joy, late coming to some, lights up the wastes of past loneliness, making them shine through a purple haze which veils all their barren outline; coming to others it only smites those wastes into sharper contrast with itself, and makes their hardness something to be grudged and murmured over still. But Mrs. Plummersleigh had the sunlight now, and though she could not help being sensible that her own continuance in well doing ought to have brought it to her long ago, still she would make the best of it during the remainder of her life.

“Oh! what a *love*,” said Mrs. Polemont, enthusiastically, seizing the newly decorated hand, and scanning the diamond that flashed upon it. “I must get it into the proper light. You don’t mind my taking it off, just for a moment, do you?”

"Not in the least," Mrs. Plummersleigh replied, "so long as you give it back to me again."

"Of course. Oh! it *is* a beauty. I never would let the ring which George gave me come off my finger after he had once put it there, but then everyone called me a goose for my pains. You remember, don't you, how particular I used to be about it?"

"Yes. But I am not superstitious. I attach very little importance to anything of that sort. It is a lovely jewel, though."

"Lovely!" And Mrs. Polemont held the diamond up to the light, turning it round until it looked like a mass of tiny rainbows. "I call it magnificent! I never saw anything more exquisite. I was sure Mr. Aubury would give you a very handsome one. He is not a man to do things by halves. Maria dear, I really am so glad for you. I think you are so very suitable for the position. And now tell me exactly

what he said. He is not a very demonstrative man, is he?"

"No. And indeed I do not wish it."

"I should think not. You are such a very quiet person yourself. It would be rather annoying to you than otherwise. Now, you know, if George had not made no end of a fuss over me, I should have been as miserable as possible. But so long as a man is in earnest it is all right, and I am sure Mr. Aubury is that. Now tell me all about it, there's a good creature. When is it to be?"

"Mr. Aubury does not wish for a long engagement," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, quietly, replacing the ring, and settling down again to her work.

"I should think not, indeed. It is not as if he had a house to furnish, and all that sort of thing. I should say six weeks would be ample."

"That is exactly the time he suggested, Isabel—six weeks."

"That would bring it to about the end of September. He always goes into Scotland for the shooting in September, but I should think he will scarcely do it this year."

"Into what part of Scotland?"

"Oh! I don't know. He rents a part of a moor somewhere, not far, I believe, from where young Moriston comes from. But, under the circumstances, he is sure not to go now."

"I should think not, Isabel."

And Mrs. Plummersleigh decided in her own mind that, if the moor which Mr. Aubury usually rented was anywhere near the Stormonts' place, he certainly should *not* go there this year, nor any other year, so long as she was able to prevent it.

"I think," she continued, after a pause, "that, as he has named six weeks, I shall let him have his own way."

"Very much his own way, I should say, Maria. It is a very sensible way. You

could run up to town and buy your things, and have everything ready in a week. Have you decided where it is to be? I have been thinking, Maria dear, that, as there does not seem to be anyone who has a claim upon you, it would be so delightful to have the wedding from our house. George and I were talking it over last night, and we both said it would give us the very greatest pleasure."

"Thank you, Isabel. I am sure you are very kind. I have already decided to go back to Broadminster almost immediately. I think that would be the wisest plan. It keeps one out of the way of so much gossip, you know. I shall take rooms with Mrs. Drew, where I stayed, you remember, after I left your father. But, if you really wish it, I could come here a day or two before, and the wedding could take place very quietly from your house. We should both of us like it to be very quiet."

"I daresay. And perhaps your idea of

going to Broadminster until just before is a good one, for you may depend upon it that nobody in Abbot's Florey but yourself and Mr. Aubury will be talked about for the next six weeks. Still I should like you to have been here all the time. I would have made everything so nice and convenient for you."

"Thank you. Only you know we are not like a couple of young people. Of course, nothing will be said about the engagement at present. Mr. Aubury wishes us both to go over and spend a long day at the castle before I leave for Broadminster. He thinks it would be advisable for me to see the rooms, and so on."

"Yes, exactly, and then you can tell him any little alterations you would like making. Old Mrs. Martlet will never have any suspicion, if we put it upon your wanting to see the places that have historical interest, and that sort of thing. And I always say that, however nicely a house is furnished,

there is sure to be something for a lady to suggest. I daresay you did not take much notice when you were there before."

"Yes, I did. I always do take notice. Very few things escape me. I shall recommend Mr. Aubury to have the dining-room entirely refitted. That moreen is so very cold. And the carpet is simply atrocious."

"Yes; a bachelor is always out of his depth when it comes to furnishing. A clever upholsterer can palm off anything upon him. If you had but seen the curtains when I came to this house, and yet George, poor fellow, had given any quantity of money for them, under the idea that they were the very newest style. And do get Mr. Aubury to re-paper the drawing-room, Maria. That gloomy old thing is enough to give one the creeps. It is always making faces at you."

"I have no doubt," said Mrs. Plummers-leigh, with an appearance of dignity, "that

the house will be re-papered throughout. I think it is only due to me."

"Do you really think so? I am sure a good many of the rooms have been done since I came to Abbot's Florey, two years ago. One doesn't think that much for a paper, and especially where there are no children to tear about."

"I should think Linnet tears about as much as half a dozen children," Mrs. Plummersleigh replied. "How the manners of that poor girl do want attending to!"

This was the first time Linnet's name had been mentioned in the conversation. Mrs. Polemont was quiet for a moment.

"Dear me! I had quite forgotten about Linnet. I wonder what she will do. Of course, you see, being only half sister to Mr. Aubury——"

"Of course not," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, apprehending the situation at once. "But I shall not suggest any change. Linnet is very well disposed, and I have no

doubt I could be of great service to her. If you remember, Mr. Aubury was saying, when he wished us to pay her some attention, that the companionship of a lady would do her a world of good. Not, however, that one would look at it in the light of a permanent arrangement."

"Well, I was just wondering how Mr. Aubury would look upon it. You see, Linnet has been with him so long. She is really more like a daughter to him than anything else. I should think it would be quite a trouble for him to part with her. And he is such a tender-hearted man."

But Mrs. Plummersleigh was not going to argue that point. She never did argue a point, except when seeking to impress upon the poor of her district the fact that lentils were more economical than fried bacon. Her plan was to make up her mind about a thing, and then, sooner or later, it was done. And she made up her mind now that, when Mr. Aubury married, his young step-sister

should no longer look upon his home as a permanent one for herself. At the same time, there was no need to hurry matters.

"It is very soon to be making arrangements, Isabel dear," she said. "I do not think Mr. Aubury and I are at all likely to quarrel over anything that may be proposed. I am quite comfortable about it.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. PLUMMERSLEIGH would have been still more comfortable about it, could she have known Miss Alvisa Clerehart's opinion concerning Linnet's future. It so chanced that the following day Mrs. Polemont and her friend called at the old vicarage. Mrs. Polemont felt herself bound to do this occasionally, Miss Alvisa being one of her husband's best patients, and likely, according to present appearances, to remain so ; though the doctor himself always said, as he had said for the last ten years, that some of these days she would be up and about again. And Mrs. Polemont took

Mrs. Plummersleigh with her on this occasion, because of course Miss Alvisa would very soon hear of the important event which was going to happen in Abbot's Florey, and she would feel a natural curiosity to know something of the lady beforehand. Besides, Mr. Aubury had always been such a very kind friend to her. Everyone knew that he had the entire management of her land and money affairs, and that most of the companionship she was able to have at all, poor thing ! came to her from his almost daily visits. And respecting him so much, and being so much indebted to him, it would be only kind to give her an early opportunity of making the acquaintance of his future wife ; for Mrs. Polemont was quite sure that, if Miss Alvisa had a woman's feeling at all, she would never rest until Mrs. Aubury, that was to be, had been introduced to her.

Accordingly, on their way to spend that long day at the castle, they called and spent

half an hour at the old vicarage, nothing of course being said about what was likely to happen. And the result of the interview was that, the next time Miss Alvisa had a quiet talk with Owen Aubury, she proposed that, after his marriage, Linnet should come to pay her an indefinitely long visit, a visit which might even end in her taking up her abode there entirely.

From which it might be inferred either that Mrs. Plummersleigh had made such a favourable impression upon Miss Alvisa, that she wished her dear friend to reap the sole advantage of so much choice companionship ; or else that, with her quick perception of character, she had found out that Linnet's home, when Mrs. Aubury had the control of it, would no longer be so pleasant as the girl had found it these ten years past.

“ At any rate, let her come to me for a little while, Owen. Things will perhaps shape themselves afterwards. Besides, at

first it will be much better for you and your wife to be alone together."

Mr. Aubury involuntarily knitted his brows, and set his lips together, as he thought of that, but Miss Alvisa took no notice.

"You will find out in that way," she continued, "what you really have to give to each other, and you will find it out very much sooner."

"It will not be a great deal to find out, Alvisa."

"Whatever it is, much or little, it is all you have to live upon until death parts you, and so you must make it as valuable as you can. You have no right, Owen, to take a woman's happiness into your own keeping, to shut out from her almost everything that does not come through yourself, unless you have a great deal to give her."

"I shall give Mrs. Plummersleigh a very comfortable home, Alvisa, and I shall sur-

round her with all that care and attention can do for her. If more comes I shall be thankful."

"Then, Owen, I must say I cannot think why you asked her to be your wife."

Mr. Aubury was silent. To be so, even though it lowered him for ever in Miss Alvisa's esteem, was the first token of the loyalty which he owed to Mrs. Plummers-leigh. No one must ever know in what manner their engagement had come about. He changed the subject.

"We must leave it, Alvisa. What is past is past. I will do my duty. Do not fear that. And about Linnet. Well, let it be as you propose, just at first. If the child only knew how much it is for her sake that it is all going to happen."

"Perhaps she will know one day. And, if not, it is the doing right, not having other people praise it, that is the best thing. Besides, what you do for duty will be sure to bring peace at the last. Only remember

this, Owen. If you have done it for duty to Linnet, you have to carry it on for duty to another. It is not an easy thing to marry for duty."

"Not so easy as to live alone for the past, Alvisa."

And that was all they said. Mr. Aubury never asked what Miss Alvisa thought of the lady who was to be his wife, and Miss Alvisa never told him. For that was a point, perhaps the only one, on which they could not be perfectly sincere with each other. And it was arranged that, as soon as the wedding had taken place, Linnet was to go for a long visit to the old vicarage.

Mrs. Polemont and Mrs. Plummersleigh spent a very pleasant day at the castle, during which, under the pretext of admiring several fine views from the different windows, they decided which rooms would require re-fitting. As for the furniture, Mrs. Plummersleigh thought it would be more interesting to attend to that after she had

taken possession; but papering, painting, and whitewashing were not things which required her immediate supervision. Besides, having spent so many years of her life in attending upon other people's convenience in the matter of house-cleaning, it was hard if now other people could not attend upon hers.

Next day she went to Broadminster, having taken apartments in Mrs. Drew's quiet little house at the north end of the cathedral close. And on the very afternoon of that day Mrs. Polemont made a round of calls, during each one of which she made known the piece of news which she had been aching to publish ever since Mr. Aubury dined with them on that Wednesday evening, namely, that he really was engaged to Mrs. Plummersleigh at last, and that the wedding would take place about the end of September.

CHAPTER IX.

“ **T**HREE then, Martlet, there’s your leg of mutton, if you like.”

And, as she said it, the housekeeper of Florey Castle set down on the front kitchen table a dish of fine, old-fashioned cut-glass, the very one out of which her master was accustomed to help himself to marmalade when it was his pleasure to take any.

Martlet looked up with inquiring surprise written on every line of his shrewd, weather-beaten face. Was Betsey going to have softening of the brain, or what was it she was going to have? Or by what new process of logic had she convinced herself,

and was she bent upon convincing him, that Mr. Aubury's best marmalade-jar was a leg of mutton? And such a sensible woman as she was in a general way.

It was about seven o'clock, and Martlet had come in for his pipe by the front kitchen fire, a luxury he usually indulged in about that hour, because his wife was then ready to bring her knitting and sit down too, the dinner being fairly out of hand, and Tidy disposed of at the back, washing up the crockery. After his four o'clock tea, Betsy did not much encourage her husband to show up again until seven; for she said, if a man came in when you'd got the thick end of the work cleared out, it was as much as she cared for him to do, for you'd the chance of a bit of quiet then. Otherwise, and when dinner was "agate," she was best left to herself, if it was a calm temper that people wanted her to be in.

And Martlet, too, had earned the right to disspread himself as he did by the com-

fortable fire, and to enjoy his pipe with the leisureliness of a man whose day's work lies behind him. For he had just returned from selling sheep at the Broadminster market, and selling them at a good price, too. And, more than that, it was not the duke's shepherd only, but the agent from Squire Camperdown's on the other side of the moor that had asked him to go into the "Three Jolly Boys," and have a glass of ale or two over the transaction, which offers he had magnanimously declined ; so that, if he came home with a sober head on his shoulders, it was his own good sense that had done it, and Betsey might thank Heaven that her husband was not as other men. And that being the case, that he should have the comfortable side of the big fireplace, and a mug of the best home-brewed to his pipe, was only what he had a right to expect. But the leg of mutton puzzled him.

Betsey enjoyed his bewilderment for

awhile with grim satisfaction. The subject had never been mentioned between them since that night when, ironing out the pleats of Mr. Aubury's shirt-front, her good man had drily insinuated that all her savoury cooking needed, in the matter of the master's matrimonial affairs, was the mutton to begin with.

"I thought I'd fixed you," she said, taking up her knitting, and resuming her seat by the fire; for, somehow, she always did like a fire in that big front kitchen, let the weather be what it might. "But the mutton's there now, and never a doubt, as the master's been and sent for me his very self to speak about it. Martlet, you spoke a true word, you did, when you and me was set here a month back, talking about whether it was to be a wedding or whether it wasn't."

Martlet began to understand,

"Betsey," he said, "I'm not the man I take myself to be if I haven't spoke a fairish

lot of true words afore now. Ay, and shall again, maybe."

"I don't deny it, Martlet. When a thing's done, you can see it as plain as I can see the butter when my churning's through. But it's just whether it'll come or whether it won't come, as takes a clever dairywoman to know, and that's what you've done, Martlet, this time."

"Ay, Betsey, go along, tell us all about it."

"Just what I mean to, Martlet. I knew it was something out of the common when he sent for me into the dining-room, along with the wine and the preserved ginger, and he was set up there by himself at the top of the table, as stiff and upright as if it had been for prayers of a Sunday morning. It wasn't linen to be got out, nor the best lodging-room to be stripped, nor jellies nor preserves, nor nothing but the very thing that he out with as soon as ever I shut to the door behind me."

“You don’t say it’s warning the master’s gone and given you, Betsey?”

Betsey put down her knitting and looked steadily at him for a moment, much as an orthodox priest looks at a parishioner who has ventured to exhibit a doubt as to the damnability of Dissent.

“Martlet, you sit in your chair and say that to me, and me the woman I am, and not accustomed to be spoken to in any such manner. No, Martlet, I haven’t lived here better than forty years from my first coming under-girl to Miss Goodenough to what I am at the present moment, to be given warning to like a common scullery-maid, as hires by the year and goes as soon as she can better herself. Martlet, you’ll take that back, if *you* please.”

Martlet took it back accordingly, whereupon his wife resumed her knitting and her discourse.

“I don’t say, Martlet, as it’s a worse change than the master’s going to make, and

I don't say it's a better ; that's for time to tell, and experience likewise. But it's a lady he's going to marry, and that's what it is, and now you know, you do."

Betsey was silent for awhile, but it was a silence which told very plainly that there was more to tell when she chose to tell it. But Martlet took the wind out of her sails by remarking, in his dry, sententious way,

"I could have told you that a good bit ago, Betsey, if it hadn't have been that I'm not a man that talks when there's no need to."

Betsey smiled derisively,

"Oh, yes. When the cat's out of the bag it's easy saying you'd had hold of the string all along. Then, maybe, if you know so much, you know who the lady is."

"She's Mrs. Plummersleigh."

Betsey looked at her husband as if, after all, he was a man of discernment. And Martlet, after having received this tribute,

which he felt was no more than his due, condescended to particulars.

"It's here, Betsey, as I've told you many and many's the time, I'm not a man that talks a deal, but I just looks round about and I sees, and I says nothing, and that's where it is. And ever since I saw them two agate over that bank among the wild roses, and Mrs. Polemont and Miss Linnet on afore, I felt as sure what it was going to come to as if I'd heard their banns read out by Mr. Flowerdale hisself."

"Then I think you might have told me, Martlet, and me your wife, and a good one too, as you can't say I'm not."

"Betsey, it wasn't mine to tell. I know what belongs to a man as has a gentleman for his master."

"Well, you're right there, Martlet, and so I won't go again it. But to think that I should never have had a thought, and her coming here as she did along with Mrs. Polemont not a week back, and Miss Linnet

took 'em all round the house, and showed them what there was to see, and the battle-axes and things, and then she come to me, and it was the key of the tower she wanted, and I up and got them it, and went round myself, because of its being many a shilling I've took that way."

"And I should think Mrs. Plummersleigh wouldn't stick at giving you one neither; did she, Betsey?"

"Martlet, she never so much as mentioned it. If that woman's got the soul of a guinea-pig inside her, it's as much as ever she's got, and them stairs as steep as they are for a person at my time of life, and as easy to slip down as not, when you're what you may call tired with the morning's work. And such a fuss about the dinner that night as never was, and the best of everything to be got out, and the spotted damask set with the side slips, and me as innocent as a new-born babe."

"Betsey, you're a sensible woman most

ways. I don't say as ever I saw a sensibler, but as regards this here you've been as blind as a bat, and that's just what you've been."

"I have, Martlet, I don't deny it, and deceived likewise. There then."

And Betsey went out to scold Tidy, who was washing up the things in the back kitchen. She felt as if she must scold somebody.

"Goodness! do make a less noise then, will you?—setting them plates to drip, and side the things a little out of the way. Anyone might think you'd been hired out of a public, where the meals and things was always going, for such a throng as you make about you. Dear! dear! if I'd took to my work in that shiftless way, it isn't forty years I should have lived in a respectable house like the present. Here, let *me*. I'd as soon any day put a hand to it myself as see a slattern doing."

And, with a few brisk, vigorous strokes,

aimed right and left, Mrs. Martlet cleared away pots, kettles, and pans into their respective places.

“Marry,” she said to the astonished “under-girl,” who stood in the middle of the back-kitchen, dishcloth in hand, watching the sudden onslaught, “but if I’d had the christening of you it’s a different calling you’d have got from me. If you’re Tidy by name you’re untidy by nature, and that with a mistress that’s worked herself night and day to put you into a better way. Now get you gone and look to the poultry, and leave the fettling up to me, and when you’re back again you’ll see what sense can do.”

CHAPTER X.

“**T**HHERE, Martlet, I feel better now,”
Betsey said, as she returned to her
big arm-chair and her knitting in the front
kitchen. “I felt I was like to let fly at
somebody, and Tidy had a better right to
it nor what you had yourself, being one
that always deserves a scolding, whether she
gets it or not. But to think, Martlet, only
to think of it, that I should never have seen
no more than that.”

“Never mind, Betsey honey,” said her
husband, who had been waiting patiently
for the passing of the storm, thankful that
it had not descended on his own head.

“I’d liever be as blind as a bat than as cunning as a fox.”

“Ah! there you’ve got it, Martlet. And one of them contriverous sort as’ll see all round a thing before you’ve had time to name it. She did take a deal of notice, now I come to remember, and said how this thing might be done, and that thing might be done, and what a pretty place it could be made; but I never gave it a thought what she meant, with me not being a woman to hold suspicion. I’ll warrant it was all settled then, and she just come to the place with t’other lady for a blind, to see what she would like done.”

“Well, Betsey, we’d best be still about it. She’s the master’s choice, and he’s had his time to pick—ay, and plenty to pick from, too.”

But now Martlet was getting upon a favourite subject of his, the readiness of womankind generally to be, as he termed it, “picked.” And it was a subject Betsey

had views of her own upon, and strong ones, too; and, even though to deliver them at the present time might involve speaking a word for the obnoxious Mrs. Plummers-leigh, still she could not let the opportunity pass.

“That’s your way of looking at it, Martlet, and a poor one, too. As if the women folk were all spread out afore you, and you’d only to finger and choose them as please you best, with never a word said about whether themselves was agreeable likewise. That wasn’t the way when you come after me, Martlet. I lay it was me did the picking and choosing then, and a rare piece of work you had afore you got me to speak the word.”

“I don’t deny it,” said Mr. Martlet.

“No, nor can’t if you would.”

“No, nor wouldn’t if I could, Betsey honey, and so that ends it: But there’s women and women. And some of them

fixes on a man so as he can't help himself but ax them."

Mr. Aubury's housekeeper laid down her knitting.

"Now, Martlet, you say that again, and I'll give you a piece of my mind as you won't forget in a hurry. It's a poor sort of man as thinks a woman has nothing better to do than lay herself out to catch him ; and it's a poor sort as says it, too. And, if it was me as had to speak the word, I should say he wasn't worth the catching. And if there's women and women, and them that does and them that doesn't, well, what I've got to say is, that I've seen as many as most, and I've only seen them that doesn't. It's a mean way for a man as has got himself blessed with a good wife, to go and say as she laid herself out to catch him."

"I didn't go to say any such a thing, Betsey."

“Yes, you did. And if you didn’t, you meant it. And a poor catch indeed, if that was all I wanted, to work and slave as I’ve had to do, and the dairy on my mind this twenty years, and the poultry and every egg as comes into the place to be accounted for; and there’s them in Broadminster this very minute, keeping their shop and back parlour, and a girl for the rough work, who would have gone down on their knees to me when I lived cook with Miss Good-enough, if I’d only spoke the word, before I took up with you. It isn’t a woman that’s worth her salt who need lay herself out to catch anyone. She does ‘em a good turn enough if she lets them catch *her*, and that’s my mind, Martlet, and now you know it.”

“I wonder what Miss Linnet’ll do,” said Martlet, quite ready to change the conversation. “It isn’t everybody as would be favourable for her to stop on, and she not belonging to the master, as one may say, like an own child.”

"She'd better lay herself out to get picked up," said his wife, contemptuously. "Anybody as wants a husband may come to you to know what they've got to do. I wonder you've patience to take your hat off to 'em, and women the things you think they are."

"Betsey honey, you've took it wrong way. I only say there's them that does and there's them that doesn't."

"Martlet, you can't back-take your words, that a man has nothing to do but only pick and choose."

"Betsey, we'll let it go. I'm never the man to argy when it's Broadminster market I've been to. Not that it was beer as did it, for never a drop I took while I was settled here with you to pour it for me; but one kind o' likes to be quiet at the back end of the day, and it's been a deal on my mind, has what Miss Linnet, bless her! will do when there's a change made."

"Miss Linnet won't be fast," said Betsey,

sententiously. "There's one as is ready to kiss the very ground she walks upon. But, as you didn't tell me, Martlet, I don't see any reason to open out to you."

"All right, honey. You can keep it as close as ever you've a mind to, and, when all's said and done, you'll see I shall be as wise as yourself. And there's more on 'em than one, so as she can take which she has a mind to."

Betsey gave a snort of finely conclusive scorn.

"There then, Martlet, you've eat your own words, and so I've nothing more to say. It's the men that can pick and choose where they like, is it, then, and has it all their own way?"

But Martlet was too wise a man to go back on that track. He thought he should better consult his own comfort by bringing forward for his wife's benefit a piece of information which he had intended to keep to himself, but which now would be very

useful in starting her off on a fresh scent.

"There's Mr. Burstborough, Betsey, him as come to Abbot's Florey about the fishing. I've took note of what I've seen, and, if Miss Linnet 'ud say snip, he'd say snap soon enough. My name isn't Luke Martlet, if that's not a true word."

"You don't mean it, Martlet?" said Betsey. "And him owning the property he does at Broadminster. They say he could keep a carriage *and* pair, if he chose to, only, not having a lady in the house, there's no need at present. How come you to know it, Martlet?"

"Same as I comes to know most things, Betsey: by looking round about, and taking notice. You see, being out of doors a deal, and Miss Linnet the same, it makes a difference."

"Well, maybe it does. But you see a vast that passes me by, and I don't reckon myself a woman that can't see as far as most. Now I come to think of it, he's been

here pretty well of late, though I never gave it a thought what he was after. But, if it lies between him and young Mr. Moriston, Martlet—and it is young Mr. Moriston as I had in my mind, and I don't mind telling you——”

“No, Betsey; particular as I knowed it afore.”

“Well, if it's between them two, I'd a deal rather young Mr. Moriston had her, though it isn't much likely that she'll ever ride in a carriage and pair with him. It isn't a thing, isn't book-larning and such like, that gets a man forrad in these times.”

“No. Spekilation does it a deal better. But there's them that's happier on their own two feet than a many that rides, if it comes to a quiet mind and a contented. But, Betsey, how did he frame to tell it thee? I mean the master. I wonder if them sort of folks feels similar the same as we do when it's a wedding as has to be given notice of. Law! Betsey——”

And old Martlet glanced up at his wife with a half-sheepish shyness, and then back again at the smoke curling out of his pipe.

“Law! Betsey, I shall never forget what a taking I was in when I had the old vicar to get told what you and me had settled betwixt us. The times I started, and back went again, and once I got as far as the door, and turned me round; for, study as I would, I couldn’t frame it right. And then I writ it, and got it off by heart, but not a word of it come when I was stood up afore him. And I reckon you didn’t frame much different, Betsey, did you, when your turn come?”

“Not I,” said the good woman, giving a sharp glance round to see that Tidy was safely out of earshot. “Miss Goodenough might have thought I’d lost my wits, for as foolish as I looked when I’d cleaned myself and gone in to speak the word. Yes, and never got it spoke either, only sat me down on a chair by the door and started crying,

and she had to guess what it was that way. But, bless you, Martlet, the master was as cool as a cucumber, and his words as ready as the clerk under the pulpit. Just set on to tell me I was to make pretty well of jams and such-like, as there might be extry wanted to see us through the winter ; and then he told me there would as likely as not be a good bit of painting and white-washing to do, as you may be sure I up and stared at him then, with such a spring cleaning as we'd had ; for you remember it yourself, Martlet, how, if it was a minute, it was a month that I was agate, and every inch of board scoured to that whiteness you might have eaten off it. And everything that one could name in the shape of dust or dirt made a clean sweep of. You can bear me witness, Martlet, if anyone can, that, when there's cleaning to do, I'm not the woman to shrink from it."

Martlet said he could. It was only Betsey's temper during cleaning time that one

had to speak of in connection with shrinking. But he did not mention that.

"Yes," she continued, warming with the subject, "only likes, when it's done, to know that it *is* done, and not to have to meddle with it all over again same as a kitchen girl might who never puts her sweeping-brush twice where she thinks once will do. And August not out yet, and the freshness scarcely off the place, for I'm not the person to let a room be lightly used when it's once been fettled for summer. And a fire put in it? No, not if you was to go down on your knees to ask me. And then for him to tell me there would likely be a deal of whitewashing and such-like."

"I lay, Betsey, he thought that would tell the story."

"Maybe he did, but I only made my curtsey, and told him it should be seen to, though I said I didn't think there was a deal to clean at the present, and soft soap

used to that extent while even the very grocer himself made his remarks about the quantity. And then the master he looks at me and he says, 'Mrs. Martlet,' he says, 'I think it is only right to tell you that there will be a new mistress at the castle in the course of a month or so.' Them was his very words, Martlet."

"And then it was out, Betsey."

"Nay, it wasn't, for, if you'll me believe, Martlet, I thought it was the two of us he meant to be rid of, and a new couple put. And vexed I was, being one that's always done my duty as far as I had a light upon it. And I up and I says, 'Then, sir, it's a matter of warning, is it, sir? though I didn't think I'd been in the family all these years to have anyone else put over my head, and a month's notice given, as the commonest scullery-girl couldn't have had no less. But it's all right, sir, and this day month we part,' and that's exactly what I said, Martlet, for I won't deny but what my back was up

about it, as yours would have been likewise, if you'd had the words to take."

"I don't doubt it, Betsey. But you didn't part like that, and him the gentleman he is?"

"Wait while I tell you. When he saw me put about, he started, looking puzzled-like, and he says, 'Mrs. Martlet,' he says, 'there's no need for a change, and I'm sure Mrs. Plummersleigh herself would not desire it under the circumstances. I have every confidence that she will find you a trustworthy servant, as she will be the best of mistresses to you.' And with that, Martlet, it dawned upon me what he meant, it did, and I saw as clear as daylight as that was the way it was going to be, and I brightens up and I drops my curtsey again, and I says, 'Then, sir, you have my best wishes for every happiness to you and the lady, and a long life and a pleasant one. For you see, Martlet, I was that took with its coming upon me unawares that I hadn't

my words ready, as you may say, and so I just stood and fidgeted."

"Never mind, Betsey, you couldn't have put 'em better. I'd rather trusten to what comes at the moment, when it's a sensible woman has to speak."

"Maybe I couldn't, Martlet, for I'm sure he thanked me as kind like as could be. But as for showing any way with his manner or his looks that what he'd sent for me in about was any more than the commonest of the common, nothing of the sort. You couldn't have mentioned it, Martlet. If it had been no more than to tell me the ivy-leaf damask was to be got out, he couldn't have been stiller about it, not to say quiet. And with that I comed away."

CHAPTER XI.

AND now indeed Abbot's Florey was fed with food convenient for it. Never before had there been a marriage in the place which afforded such rich materials for gossip. True the old Duke of Moreland had had a daughter married, some twenty years before, but then that was a wedding whose rank lifted it quite out of the reach of ordinary people. For Lady Gertrude lived, like a water-spider, in an atmosphere of her own, and was married, so to speak, in an atmosphere of her own, too, through which nothing but the actual splendour that took place in the parish church could

be seen by outsiders. All those delightful little circumstantial details which create such a haze of interest round an engaged couple in the upper middle classes were of course entirely wanting where the parties concerned belonged to the topmost branch of the peerage. The tradespeople made her a present, and the tenantry were invited to a dance, and the poorer sort had an ox roasted whole on the village green for their own special benefit ; but the minor gentry of the place, who were too respectable to have a slice of beef offered them, or a place in the quadrille where Miss Ribston, the blacksmith's daughter, might be their *vis-à-vis*, and not respectable enough to sit in the actual light of ducal diamonds, got comparatively little enjoyment from all that was going on.

Now, however, things were different. Everyone knew Mr. Aubury ; and still more—though she had only been amongst them for such a short time, and as a visitor,

too—everybody knew Mrs. Plummersleigh, from the vicar's wife, who had found her so helpful in the parish work, down to Mrs. Wright, who associated her chiefly with contentions relative to lentils and fried bacon, but who nevertheless had a certain pride in feeling that she belonged to the district whose visitor was shortly to become the mistress of Florey Castle, and who not unnaturally looked for advantages to accrue therefrom ; for whom should Mrs. Aubury remember in her Christmas doles if not those who were so poor as to need advising to drop their daily bit of frizzle, and exchange it for that mess of pottage which, whatever it might have been for savouriness in Esau's time, was nowhere nowadays in comparison of bacon ?

As for Mrs. Polemont, never had that best-intentioned of little women been so happy as when she went round amongst her friends for the express purpose of announcing the engagement. Never before had she

been a person of so much importance as during the few weeks which elapsed between it and the wedding. For of course everybody came to her for information. It was the doctor's wife who had to tell how it all happened, - where the offer was made, how Mr. Aubury had behaved on the occasion, what the wedding dress was to be, how much the engaged ring had cost, what sort of a lover the quiet master of Florey Castle proved himself, whether the lady seemed very much set up or not. In short, whatever questions arose in connection with the subject, and in truth their name was legion, Mrs. Polemont had to answer them all, until she wished the wedding well over, and her drawing-room free from anxious inquirers.

But, of all those inquirers, Mrs. Flowerdale had the greatest number of questions to ask, and was the most difficult to be satisfied in the answering of them. For the vicar's wife had a severely logical mind, and

would insist upon going down to the roots of a thing, which was a most inconvenient peculiarity when the roots of the things in question were like those of the dandelions on one's lawn, reaching so very far away from the actual visible plant, and when you think you have got at them, springing out again in quite a different direction, necessitating a fresh application of the hoe of inquiry.

“Who was she, Mrs. Polemont? I don’t ask it from curiosity, but as a friend. Where did she come from, and had she a father, and had she a mother; and what did they call her before she was married, and what was the position of her first husband? Don’t you really know anything about it?”

“Well, really, Mrs. Flowerdale, I don’t. I can only tell you that she is quite a lady, and that she comes out of Scotland somewhere, though she hasn’t a bit of the accent of the country.”

“Yes, but, Mrs. Polemont, surely Mr.

Aubury is not going to marry her upon no other information than that, that she is quite a lady, and comes out of Scotland somewhere. One really wishes something a little more definite than that."

"I suppose Mr. Aubury is old enough to know what he is doing," replied Mrs. Polemont, not without a touch of temper; for she felt annoyed that anyone who had lived so many years as lady-housekeeper with her father, and had, moreover, been her own guest for the last four months, should not, on those accounts, be considered respectable enough for all the Mr. Auburys in the world. "I do not make it my business to inquire into his affairs. All I can tell you is that they are engaged, and that Mr. Aubury goes over to Broadminster to visit Mrs. Plummersleigh often enough to find out all the rest for himself."

And, if it had not been such a nuisance to be on bad terms with one's vicar's wife, Mrs.

Polemont would have shown considerably more temper than she did.

"Oh! yes, yes," said Mrs. Flowerdale, "I don't mean to say that she is not everything in the world one could wish. I am sure no one has more reason than I have myself to speak well of Mrs. Plummersleigh; so exceedingly useful as she has been in the district, and such a help to my husband in his parish work. I only wish we had more like her."

"If you mean *me*," said Mrs. Polemont, "I never *could* do anything in a district. It is not in my line."

"I don't mean you, my dear Mrs. Polemont. I don't mean anybody at all. I am only stating a general fact, which you would soon find out for yourself, if you were in my position; and I don't wish to whisper so much as a syllable against Mrs. Plummersleigh. Only one naturally likes to be satisfied when it comes to a question of intimacy.

One does not know a bit who her people are."

"Well, I can't tell. And as to her marriage, I don't fancy it was a very happy one. She very seldom refers to her husband. I believe her friends in Scotland own land. She told me once they were anxious she should go and live amongst them again, but she finds the climate of this part of the country suit her better. You see, she has neuralgic pains in her head very often."

"So I suppose; and Scotland is not a good place for them."

"No. Besides, she can fix her residence where she chooses. I do not suppose she is compelled to earn her own livelihood."

"Oh! indeed," replied Mrs. Flowerdale, as if that fact shed entirely a more satisfactory light upon the matter.

There might be little shortcomings somewhere as to family connection and previous position, but, so long as a lady was not compelled to earn her own livelihood, she was

eligible to any reach of intimacy. Inquiry need no further go.

“ You don’t remember in what part of Scotland her people lived,” the vicar’s wife resumed, after a little side-firing relative to the changes which might be introduced into the castle establishment by a new mistress—“ north or south, or where ?”

“ Well, I *ought* to remember, for I am sure I have heard it, though Mrs. Plummersleigh does not often speak about it herself. Is there such a place as Airdrie something—Airdrie Burn or Airdrie Muir, or anything like that ?”

“ Airdrie Muir, you mean. Yes, it belongs to Lord Stormont ; a little out-of-the-way place somewhere in the Lowlands : the very place that young Moriston comes from —young Moriston, you know, who is being sent to college by Miss Alvisa.”

“ Yes, then it *is* Airdrie Muir, for I remember once we were talking about it, and we made out that it was the same place.

And young Moriston said he thought he remembered some one of the name, but Mrs. Plummersleigh said it was a mistake. Not, of course, that he would be likely to know any of her people personally."

"Oh, *dear*, no, his connections being what they are, of course not. Shepherds, or something of that sort, isn't it?"

"I believe so, and very creditable to him that he has been able to raise himself so far by his own merits and industry. How proud Miss Alvisa will be if he gets that professorship in Calcutta."

"Yes, *if* he gets it, but that is a very large *if*," replied Mrs. Flowerdale, who could never forget that young Moriston went to Balliol with that very scholarship which she hoped would have taken her own son there. Not that the money was of so very much importance to them, though an odd hundred or two always came in usefully; but the scholarship was an honour, and both the vicar and herself

would have liked Reginald to have carried it off. " You know, Mrs. Polemont, I do not believe in a young man spending all his time fishing or lying under beech-trees, even if he is what they call in a delicate state of health, and that I don't think Mr. Moriston is, judging by the breadth of his shoulders."

Mrs. Polemont, as a doctor's wife, looked at the subject anatomically, and she could not see why the fact of having studied himself into headaches could make a man's shoulders narrow if they had been broad to begin with. But she would ask her husband about it.

" I don't think myself that he looks the man he was last Christmas," she replied, " when we used to see him going to the hunt with Mr. Aubury ; but one can never tell from appearances. I do think he will get the professorship, though. You see, Miss Alvisa has such faith in him, and she is more likely to know than we are."

"I am not sure of that, Mrs. Polemont. People at a distance can often judge more correctly than those who are blinded by partiality. And blinded in that way Miss Alvisa certainly is, for she seems to think there is not a man in the University able to hold a candle to him. I think she must have said something of the kind to Mr. Aubury, or else he would surely never allow young Moriston to go about with Linnet as he has been doing. I consider it discreditable, unless there is an understanding between them. I wonder if there is anything of the kind?"

"I really cannot say. Mr. Aubury talks to George a great deal when they get together, but he has never mentioned it."

"No. I should scarcely think there can be, for the young man's prospects are so very uncertain. Mrs. Plummersleigh might not object, though. It would be so very much pleasanter for her to have the place entirely to herself. Do you really

think, Mrs. Polemont, she will have Linnet living there after the marriage? You see, there is nothing binding in the relationship. It is not as if she were his daughter, or even his own sister."

"No, nothing binding at all," said Mrs. Polemont, who was not at all sure, so far as the future Mrs. Aubury was concerned, that Linnet would have a very hearty invitation to remain, "unless, you know, Mr. Aubury insisted upon it. One would not wonder at a wife wishing to have her home to herself, and especially just at first; but Mr. Aubury is a man who would insist upon what he felt to be right, however much it cost him."

Mrs. Flowerdale laughed.

"My dear, you talk like the delightful little innocent that you are. When Mr. Aubury is married, there will be two wills in the house, and I am not at all sure whether the wife's will not be the strongest. As if a man can say he will do this or that, how-

ever much it may cost him, when there is a wife to put in her word about it. And especially in a matter of that kind."

"Well, I don't know. I am sure, for myself, I always do what George wishes me. I wouldn't go contrary to him on any account."

"And very rightly, because you happen to have a husband who knows how to hold his own. But if I judge Mr. Aubury rightly, he is not a man who knows how to hold his own, and a very fortunate thing if he does not, for Mrs. Plummersleigh is certainly a woman who can hold *her* own, and it is always better when only one of a couple can do that. You see, matters are settled in no time when there is only one opinion to take about the settlement."

"I don't know. But anyhow, I think it is a very suitable match."

"Oh! dear, yes, the most suitable match in the world. And being such a good churchwoman, too, she will influence him

in subscriptions and all that sort of thing. I tell Percy he need not trouble himself an atom now about the Christmas charities. Mr. Aubury will be quite ready to set them afloat on his own account, without ever sending the book round, now that he has Mrs. Plummersleigh at his elbow. And we shall be able to cut the flannel petticoats a full length this year. Dear me! the trouble I have had about them sometimes, for the poor people are always ready to fly off to the chapel if the dissenting petticoats happen to be half an inch longer than the Church of England ones. I never knew what an inch of flannel meant before, because, you know, they come over to the Establishment just as readily if the extra bit is on our side, so that the inch does it. But now you will let me know in time, will you not?"

"About the wedding? Oh! dear, yes. As soon as ever I know the exact day, I will come over and tell you. And all the

particulars, too. You shall be the very first to know."

"Thank you. Because Percy and I want to make them a handsome present, on account of having been so useful in the parish."

"It is very kind of you. Maria is sure to tell me the day before long. It is to be from our house, you know, and very quiet."

"From your house! You don't say so. What a strange thing for her not to be married from amongst her own people!"

"Well, you see, for one thing the distance is so great, and she has no near relations, only cousins, I think, or something of that sort. Of course, that makes a difference."

"Yes, perhaps it does. But you will invite them to the wedding, however distant they are. It would be such a curious wedding with none of the bride's relations, you know. That is, if she has any."

"Perhaps it would. I really have not

thought it over yet. But I am going to see Maria to-morrow, and then we shall have it all settled. And you may be sure, Mrs. Flowerdale, you shall be the very first person to know everything."

"Thank you. And if you *can*, find out what sort of present would be most acceptable. You see, one might give something they had heaps of already."

"Yes. I will try to remember that, too. George always says I am as clever as anybody he knows in finding out things of that kind."

And so Mrs. Flowerdale took her leave, but came back again before she had reached the gate.

"It just struck me, and I thought I had better tell you at once. If you are having the wedding at your house, and you should be crowded, with guests staying all night, I mean, you know, we should be very glad to put up one for you. I could very well manage a couple of gentlemen, now that

Reginald is away, or a lady and gentleman. So do not hesitate to make use of us, if it will be the least relief to you. Good-bye again."

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. POLEMONT went over next morning to spend the day with her friend at Broadminster, and, as they were discussing the bridal dress and other matters, took occasion to ask whether there were no relatives or friends whom she would wish asked to the wedding.

“Because, Maria dear, you have only to say so, and both George and myself would be delighted to have them. I would write at once, so that they might have plenty of time to prepare. You know we could manage with a lady and gentleman ourselves, and Mrs. Flowerdale says she should

be very pleased to put up a gentleman, or even two, because, now that young Flowerdale is on the Continent, they have plenty of room. So kind of her, isn't it? And she is so anxious to see your friends."

Mrs. Plummersleigh allowed that it was very kind, but at the same time said that she did not think there was any necessity to trespass either upon Mrs. Flowerdale's hospitality or the doctor's.

" You see, Isabel, as I said before, I have no very near relatives. Of course poor dear Mr. Plummersleigh's people have no claim whatever upon me, and as for my own friends, they have taken so little notice of me since my reverse of fortune that, beyond intimating to them that I contemplate a second marriage, nothing is necessary."

" Dear me!" said warm-hearted Mrs. Polemont, who would have invited them if they had been cousins fifty times removed, just for the sake of letting them see what a comfortable match their poor relation was

going to make, "what a very, very quiet wedding it will have to be! I had quite reckoned on some grand folks from Scotland turning up, going to a Broadminster hotel, you know, and coming over just for the ceremony and breakfast. People may forget you at any other time, but they are generally pretty well to the front when fortune smiles upon you. And you *are* being smiled upon by that person now, Maria."

"Perhaps it is so, Isabel. But I am not easily elated."

"No, I am sure you are not. But I am disappointed about having no relatives at the wedding. How we shall ever get it furnished with guests at all I cannot think now."

"Second marriages always should be very quiet," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, thoughtfully.

"Then this one will be what it ought to be, I am sure, Maria. And then about the bridesmaids?"

Mrs. Plummersleigh looked shocked.

"Bridesmaids! My dear Isabel, a widow never requires bridesmaids. It would be the extreme of bad taste to have anything of the sort."

"You don't say so! How very curious! But, now you mention it, I do remember that when the Honourable Mrs. Truffles, cousin, you know, to the old Duke, was married a year or two ago, she had no bridesmaids, and she had quite a dark dress, and a bonnet, and plain veil, and a most hum-drum affair it was altogether, on account, I suppose, of its being her second marriage. And you will have to do like that? Well, really, Maria dear, I never thought of anything so uninteresting when I proposed to have the wedding from our house. I am so disappointed. Not that I mean it unkindly though, Maria. Don't think that for a moment."

"I am sure you would not mean anything of the sort, Isabel. And you know it

will save you a great deal of trouble to have it so quiet."

"My dear Maria, the thought of trouble never entered my mind. I would cheerfully have taken any amount of trouble over it to have had things pretty, and something worth coming to see in the church. And I had quite made up my mind what Linnet was to wear. The only difficulty was about the other bridesmaids, for I did not quite see where they were to come from, as you did not seem to have any young people amongst your relations. And now it has all come to nothing. But such is life. Those are pretty handkerchiefs, Maria. Did you get them at Hursley's? And how exquisitely neatly you are marking them. If I could only do things as neatly as you do! But I always get George to mark for me."

"I like to do everything neatly, Isabel. It is just as little trouble, when you have accustomed yourself to do it. You know,

I used to tell you that before you were married."

"Yes, you told me a great many sensible things before I was married. I am afraid I have not profited by them as I might have done, yet George and I are perfectly happy, nevertheless. But, Maria, I *am* disappointed about that wedding. There is only one thing to comfort me."

"And what is that?" said Mrs. Plummers-leigh, taking out a fresh pile of handkerchiefs, and arranging one of them on her little stretcher previous to marking a delicate "M. P." upon it.

"It is that there is sure to be a wedding from the castle itself before long, and then everything can be done as prettily as we like."

"Isabel, what do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Why, I mean that Linnet will be married next of course. The only question is, which of them will she marry? You know, I always had set her

down for Keith Moriston, and really I don't know whether Mr. Aubury could have desired anything better for her. But I was calling on those two old Miss Laudervilles yesterday, and they say that Mr. Burstborough is perfectly fascinated, cannot talk about anyone else, makes himself almost ridiculous, in fact."

"Indeed! I really did not know that Linnet had any prospects of the kind. Mr. Aubury has never said anything to me about them."

"Well, I don't know that they are exactly what you would call prospects yet, but still I think it is very likely they will be. I can't help feeling just a little bit sorry about Mr. Burstborough."

"Because you think Linnet would not accept him," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, tentatively.

"Oh! dear, no, I don't know anything about that. What I mean is, I am sorry that he has come upon the scene at all. If

it had not been for his appearance, I have not the least doubt that Linnet would have married Keith Moriston."

"But he has nothing to marry upon."

"That would not have made a bit of difference. They are both of them young enough to wait. I do wonder, Maria, that Mr. Aubury has never said anything about it to you. Why, everyone knows that young Moriston used to be there as much as he was at Miss Alvisa's. Indeed, Mrs. Flowerdale said she got her husband to mention it to Mr. Aubury. But then, you know, poor, dear man! he never sees anything."

Mrs. Polemont caught up her words a little here. She had forgotten that she was speaking to the bride-elect of the "poor, dear man," and that Mrs. Plummersleigh might possibly resent such an imputation upon his powers of vision.

"I mean, you know, Maria dear, that he doesn't trouble himself about things like

other people. He lives so very much above the world, and takes so little notice. I don't exactly know how to put it, but I am sure you know what I mean, and that it isn't anything the least bit disrespectful. Only I am so stupid in getting hold of the right words."

But Mrs. Polemont need not have been afraid. Mrs. Plummersleigh was not at all offended at her plainness of speech. Indeed, nothing could be more convenient for his future wife than that Mr. Aubury, poor dear man! should not see too plainly everything that was going on. Not that she had anything scandalous to reveal, far from it. She was a woman into whose life nothing scandalous had ever come. But still there were things just as well not mentioned, nor found out; and a husband whose disposition was as inquiring as that of Mrs. Flowerdale might sometimes have put her into an awkward position.

"I know you don't mean any offence,

Isabel dear," she said, quietly, "so don't trouble about it. I quite understand Mr. Aubury's ways, and he does not look closely into such things. Still I have no doubt he will decide what is best for Linnet. A long engagement would be a most trying thing for her."

"I don't know that it would be a long engagement, if young Moriston got that Calcutta professorship. Indeed, I should think he would want to be married at once, and take her out with him."

Which would be decidedly convenient, thought Mrs. Plummersleigh, as she ironed the corner of her handkerchiefs to bring out the colour of the ink. Except that there would still be that disagreeableness about his having come from Airdrie Muir, and having to do with the Stormonts, and fancying that he had heard the name of Plummersleigh before. And, if he did open out at all, it would be so excessively unpleasant. Now, if Linnet married Mr. Burstborough,

there would be nothing of the kind, and there would be all the advantage of an immediate settlement, professorship or no professorship. But of course these matters could not be discussed with Mrs. Polemont.

"I thank you so much, Isabel dear, for what you have proposed about asking my people to come," said Mrs. Plummersleigh, when, towards the close of a very pleasant, chatty day, the doctor's wife took her leave. "It is so kind of you, and you must not think I don't appreciate it; but, after what I have said, you can quite understand, can you not? that I feel no interest in paying them any attention."

"All right, Maria. I don't care a bit about it myself, only I thought it would be pleasant for you. I shall just tell Mrs. Flowerdale that, as your friends take so little notice of you, you do not feel bound to take any notice of them. She is a person who always likes to have a reason for everything, you know. And now, if there

is anything I can do for you, you will tell me, will you not? I am not at all afraid of a little trouble."

"Thank you very much, Isabel. I really do not know what I should do without you."

And with that Mrs. Polemont went away content. When she was gone, Mrs. Plummersleigh sat down to think her own thoughts.

It was an agreeable prospect which had been opened out to her by the likelihood of Linnet's marriage. The girl was winning and loveable enough, but of a strong spirit which could rise and do battle for itself, if things went against it. And though, as regarded the ordinary details of domestic management, and the personal importance arising from having had them under her own control, Linnet would make no objection to another taking her place, still, as regarded the love and attention of which she had hitherto been the sole recipient, she

might object, and in a very annoying manner, to the turning aside of that. She had been first and foremost in her brother's affections so long that she would naturally rebel against a change. And Mrs. Plummersleigh had found out already that, though she received from Mr. Aubury courtesy, tenderness, consideration, deference, all those delicate little attentions to which during the whole of her previous life she had been a stranger, she did not receive from him that strong, overmastering love which would make him ready to give up all else for her, which would overshadow all other love, making her the one supreme object round which his whole life revolved. So long as Linnet lived with them—and for the sake of appearances she certainly for the present should do so—Mrs. Plummersleigh knew that the affection given to herself would be only second best. And she was not a woman to take the second place anywhere, when her right was

the first. If there had been times when it was necessary for her to accommodate herself to circumstances, she was in a position now when circumstances must accommodate themselves to her. The exclusive love which women prize she was not receiving, nor did she give it, so that her own common sense told her the bargain was equal. But the exclusive position and authority which a wife should hold in her own house was her right, and to the uttermost farthing would she exact that debt. And to have things comfortably settled in that direction would be much advantaged by the intentions which, to her great satisfaction, Mr. Burstborough seemed to be maturing in his own mind.

CHAPTER XIII.

SLOWLY the days went on, and Linnet learned to be a little more content in the shadow which had come over her life. For, after all, it was only a passing shadow, out of which she should come by-and-by into even more than the old sunshine. Keith sent messages of remembrance now and then through Miss Alvisa, pleasant messages, into which Linnet's loving little heart read its own meaning—a meaning for herself alone. And he spoke of seeing all his old friends again when he came back very early in October, to learn what would be decided about that Indian professorship.

If it was given to him, he would start shortly before Christmas. If not, he was to go back as tutor to Lord Stormont's boys; but in either case he was to have a few weeks with Miss Alvisa at the old vicarage, long enough, he hoped, to say many things which he had left unsaid before.

And Linnet knew so well what that meant. How the simple words had filled her with beautiful hope. Down in the dingle, beneath the yellowing hazel copse, the sweet story would all be told again. And how for that story's sake she loved to watch the leaves, now crisping to their fall, and to count each one that scattered the path to the swan-pools, and to kiss the red blush of autumn upon it; for did it not tell of Keith's coming, and of all that his coming would bring?

Everything now gathered round that time, and was measured by it. Even the great event, her brother's marriage, which was to take place at the end of September,

seemed only a landmark for the other greater event which was to follow so closely upon it. The twenty-second of September was the wedding-day, and on the sixth of October Keith Moriston was to come back to Miss Alvisa. No wonder that Linnet looked so bright as the preparations began. No wonder that Mr. Aubury, seeing the smile upon her face and the light in her eyes, thought it was all for gladness at the excellent feminine companionship which was shortly to be afforded her; and, so thinking, comforted himself in the belief that, if not for himself, at least for others, he had done well.

And those preparations had begun in good earnest. The castle was given over into the hands of paperers, painters, and white-washers. Mrs. Martlet, with a somewhat severe expression of countenance; sorted the linen, and listed the plate, and made an inventory of the glass and china, previous to resigning her keys to the lady

who, as she expressed it, was “coming to be set over them all.” And nearly every afternoon of the week saw Mr. Aubury mounted on Bobtail, trotting along the road to Broadminster, to Mrs. Plummersleigh’s quiet little lodging at the north end of the cathedral; so that if he did not find out enough about the lady he was going to marry, it could only be called his own fault.

Meantime Mr. Burstborough was improving his opportunities with the master of the castle, and, for that matter, with its future mistress too. For Mr. Burstborough was a wise man, else his contracts and speculations had not been so successful, and he knew Mrs. Plummersleigh of old, when she kept house for Mr. Fledborough and his pretty young daughter, in the Close, before Isabel won the doctor’s heart, and wounded his own. And he very shrewdly guessed that to have a good chance of success with the bonnie maiden whom he meant to make his

wife, he must open the gate of Mrs. Aubury's good will. Then all would be made plain for him, that lady being one who had a wonderful way of managing things after her own fashion. Not that she argued, or insisted, or talked, or made demonstrations about anything, but, somehow or other, what she wished done did generally come to pass.

And Mrs. Plummersleigh was quite ready, on her part, to open the gate. If Keith Moriston had had nothing to do with Airdrie Muir, and the Stormont people, and if he had never made that unlucky remark about thinking that he had heard her name or seen her face before, and if, in addition to these negative advantages, there had been the positive one of the Indian appointment, then probably Mrs. Plummersleigh would have opened the gate to the Balliol student, and closed it upon the wealthy contractor, distant relatives being, as she had found out already, much more convenient than those.

who might be continually coming down upon you for cheques and loans, and other favours. But young Moriston's prospects being as hazy as they were, not to speak of the Scottish recollections, and Mr. Burstborough's so undeniably satisfactory, the question was settled.

As for attachment, Mrs. Plummersleigh did not think much of that. A girl at eighteen could be as happy with one man as another, so long as there was a kindly disposition and a well-filled purse, which advantages nobody could say Mr. Burstborough did not possess.

“Though, somehow, I am very fond of young Moriston,” said Mrs. Polemont, who used to keep her friend informed of what went on at the castle, in a way which Mr. Aubury—“poor dear man! blind as a bat!”—never could have done. “There is something so very good and faithful about him. If he were only a little bit richer, and if he were quite sure of that professorship,

and if he had sprung from a rather more respectable stock, one could not wish anything better for Linnet than that she should marry him, now could you, Maria?"

Mrs. Plummersleigh passed over the respectability of the stock in giving her reply.

"My dear Isabel, the income and the prospects make all the difference. A long engagement is the very last thing that a girl of Linnet's temper and disposition ought to enter upon. In my opinion, guardians have no right to allow it. Of course the girl herself does not know what she is doing, but after awhile it becomes intolerably wearisome, and, in nine cases out of ten, the affection dies a natural death, and——"

"Maria!" said Mrs. Polemont, with unwonted enthusiasm, "how *can* affection ever die a natural death? If it dies at all, it must die unnaturally. Somebody or other kills it."

"Not at all, Isabel. It simply wears itself out; and at eight and twenty or

worse, the girl finds herself—well, where *does* she find herself? Entirely out in the cold as regards her prospects, and soured and miserable and unhappy. That is just the result of your long engagements. However, I sincerely hope Linnet will not be tried in that way."

"Oh, dear, no," said Mrs. Polemont, brightly. "I am sure, even if he does not get that appointment in Calcutta, the Stor-monts will be able to do something for him. You know they have no end of patronage, and Miss Alvisa says they *are* so good to him."

"I think Linnet appears very happy," remarked Mrs. Plummersleigh, slightly changing the drift of the conversation. "The prospect of our close companionship is not oppressive to her. I thought I had never seen her looking brighter than when Mr. Aubury brought her over to me yesterday."

"Bright? I should think so. She is positively running over with brightness

sometimes. Not the old *rampaging* sort of way that she used to have, you know, but real, girl-like happiness and content. I say it is because she is going to have such a good guardian as yourself, Maria. Of course you know it will make a great difference to her. She will come in for her share of all the gaieties attendant upon your marriage, and then afterwards you will chaperon her about to balls and that sort of thing. Miss Alvisa may say what she likes about Linnet not being like other girls, but I am sure she is enough like them to enjoy a dance now and then, like all the rest of us. You will not shut yourself up, Maria, will you? I know Mr. Aubury gets invitations for everything that is going on in Broadminster."

"I am not fond of society, Isabel. Still I may go into it from a sense of duty."

"Yes; only let anyone talk about duty, and then, Maria, you will go through fire and water for it. Well, then, you will have to look at it as your duty to go about with

Linnet, and see that she gets her proper share of fun. Besides, Maria, there will be your own people coming to see you. Broadminster is a very central place, especially convenient for anyone going from the south of Scotland to London ; and you may depend upon it, when your friends know what a nice home you have got, you will become much more an object of interest to them."

"The question is, Isabel, whether they will be an object of interest to *me*."

"Well, Maria, I am quite sure of this, that if I had grand friends who had neglected me for a dozen years or so, and then I became such an important person as Mrs. Aubury of Florey Castle, I should enjoy nothing so much as having them come to visit me, and letting them see that I could do without them. Maria, if ever I could be spiteful, it would be under those circumstances, and I could say my prayers at church just as comfortably after it, too. And I don't believe you are so very much

better than all the rest of us as not to have a little bit of the same feeling yourself."

"I don't profess to be better, Isabel, only I should show my spite, if I had any, differently. I should show it by entirely ignoring them."

"You mean you would never ask them at all."

"Just so. That is exactly what I mean to do."

"Oh, Maria! Then I shall never see them. And I had made up my mind that we should have a constant stream of aristocratic visitors at the castle. You *are* a disappointing woman, Maria."

Maria smiled.

"And I have made up my mind too, Isabel. I shall never invite any of my people to the castle, and I have told Mr. Aubury so."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE wedding took place at the end of September, the time appointed from the very beginning. Indeed everything had gone on exactly as it had been appointed from the very beginning. Mrs. Polemont said she never knew a wedding which went on from beginning to end so punctually. There were no ups and downs, no disappointments, no puttings off. Even the very paperers, painters, and whitewashers came to date, and finished their work to date, too. Hursley's people sent the dresses home, one after another, like clock work. The wedding

bonnet made its appearance two days before the wedding morning, and the only change in anything from first to last, was that a spray of the most softly-tinted, creamy-pink geranium was substituted for the feather-tip of pure white, which was just a bit trying to Mrs. Plummersleigh's complexion in that bonnet. And even that was because Mrs. Polemont insisted upon it, and because she said the bride must have a bit of creamy-pink geranium somewhere, on account of its being the flower she wore when the engagement was made.

Mrs. Plummersleigh herself came over to the doctor's house the night before, looking as quiet and composed as if it was a new tract-district she was entering upon, and not the mistress-ship of a beautiful old home like Florey Castle.

No one was invited to the wedding except Mr. and Mrs. Flowerdale. Linnet was there, of course, though not as brides-

maid ; and, by Mrs. Plummersleigh's suggestion, Mr. Burstborough acted as groomsman, Mr. Aubury having no other friend whom he cared to ask. Indeed there never was a wedding more scantily furnished with guests, and as for the spectators they were even more scanty ; for Mr. Aubury particularly wished it to be private, and Mrs. Plummersleigh let him have his own way entirely. People might say what they liked about her being a woman of overmastering will, but, if she went on as she began, her husband would have no reason to find fault. And so well had the vicar, and the clerk, and the doctor and his wife, and the bridegroom and his bride, kept their own counsel that nobody knew when the wedding was to be, or that it had actually taken place, until a merry peal of bells, ringing from St. Dunstan's tower, announced to all whom it might concern that finally Mr. Aubury, of Florey Castle, had done what, for the past two months,

everybody had said he was going to do, and that the castle had a mistress at last.

And he did look so quiet over it, as Mrs. Polemont told Miss Alvisa afterwards. Of course she went to tell Miss Alvisa all about it the very next day, though Linnet had gone there, as was arranged, for a long visit, as soon as the bride and groom had started on their tour. But then, as Mrs. Polemont knew very well, Linnet would not take a bit of notice of the dress, nor how the people behaved, nor how the ceremony was conducted. She just stood there by Mr. Burstborough's side, looking as pretty as a rose-bud. No wonder that the young man had no eyes for anyone else, or that, receiving his attentions, which really nobody could mistake now, she should feel too confused to be able to give a very clear account of anything.

"And the bridegroom did behave so beautifully, Miss Alvisa, and took such care of his wife. It was really touching

to see how he handed her into the vestry after the ceremony, and seemed so afraid lest even a breath should blow upon her. Not that he made any fuss about it, but he was evidently so much in earnest. I do think, after all, my dear Miss Alvisa, that there is something about the love of a middle-aged man which is so much more satisfactory than the enthusiasm of a comparative boy. To be waited upon in that quiet, unobtrusive way is what any woman might be proud of."

Miss Alvisa said it was.

"And I believe," Mrs. Polemont continued, "Mrs. Aubury *is* proud, though she takes things almost as quietly as he does. I think I may say I never saw two people make so little fuss over their happiness. I always did say she would be a fortunate woman, whoever she might be, who won the love of Mr. Owen Aubury."

Again Miss Alvisa assented. And that she did so from her heart was evident by

the smile, born of perfect peace, which overspread her face as she listened to Mrs. Polemont's happy little tide of talk.

"You who know him so well, Miss Alvisa, and have seen how much he needed a wife, I am sure you will rejoice with him. And I don't think he could possibly have chosen anyone more suitable than Maria Plummersleigh, or Mrs. Aubury, as I must call her now. For being a woman who has known trouble and privation, she will appreciate her present happiness so thoroughly, and she will make it the very enjoyment of her life to minister to the husband who has been the means of bringing so much sunshine into her path. I think those who have known what trouble is, always make such thoughtful wives."

Miss Alvisa did not assent quite so readily to that proposition. She had seen enough of the new Mrs. Aubury to doubt whether she was one of those for whom prosperity only unlocks the springs of

gratitude. It might be that, coming after long loneliness to ease and plenty, she would think only or chiefly how she could turn the light of her new content upon those who had placed it within her reach. Or it might be, and Miss Alvisa feared it would be, that that content would be concentrated entirely upon herself. It had been withheld so long that, coming at last, she must use it for her own benefit. And not until she had repaid herself for past years of dependence by enjoying to the full what was poured into her lap now, would she begin to look at the other side of the question, at the much she could do, as well as the much that could be done for her. But these were not subjects upon which Mrs. Polemont and Miss Clerehart could have much communion, and so nothing more was said.

In due time the bride and bridegroom came home, prepared to receive the congratulatory visits of their friends. The

vicar and his wife were the first to call, and, during a pleasant chat with Mrs. Flowerdale, Mrs. Aubury became possessed of a few items of information which would be very useful in directing her course of action with respect to Linnet.

For Mrs. Flowerdale, who was always ready to have a quiet little hit at Keith Moriston, remarked, in the course of the conversation, how very disappointed Miss Alvisa must be that the Indian professorship had been given to a young man from Lincoln college.

“ We heard of it only this morning from Regy, who is at Chamouni just now with one of the Lincoln men. For my part, I always did say that Miss Alvisa had better not make up her mind so decidedly about it, for I had a firm belief that young Moriston was not marked out for success. He is too lazy, Mrs. Aubury. To see him lying under the beech-tree in the old vicarage garden, with any quantity

of books scattered about, but not one of them being read, you might be sure what it would come to. And Miss Alvisa never seemed to think there was any need to rouse him to more exertion."

"Perhaps he may have something else in view," suggested Mrs. Aubury, toying with the heavy old curtain fringes as she sat in the oriel window of the castle drawing-room, its queen and mistress, where once the most she had hoped for was to be lady companion to the young girl whose future life she was now quietly shaping out according to her own ideas. "The Stormonts may perhaps take him up."

"I don't think so. You see, it is not as if he were intended for the Church. I question whether they have much interest in any useful direction. No, he will have to go tutoring on indefinitely. And all his own fault for not having bestirred himself more. But, Mrs. Aubury, it is

very much in consequence of having only a woman to look after him. I always say that the worst thing you can do for a young man is to put him into the sole management of a woman. If he does happen to have a little cleverness—and young Moriston certainly has that—he is petted and praised until he thinks himself the most wonderful genius of his times, and is quite above the real hard work which is the only thing to get a young man on now-a-days. Of course, I must call and sympathise with Miss Alvisa, but at the same time I think she has only herself to blame."

"I am so sorry." And Mrs. Aubury rapidly ran over in her own mind the line of action which would have to be followed now. "Poor Miss Clerehart has so few interests in her life. She was wrapped up in that young man."

"Well, it will perhaps be a lesson to him, and stimulate him to carve out a

career for himself in some other direction. And then, you know, I do think it is so much better when appointments of that kind are given to gentlemen by birth. Indeed, that ought to be made an essential. Now everyone knows what young Moriston has sprung from. Miss Alvisa herself never makes any secret of it, and very wisely too, for the truth is sure to come out sooner or later."

Mrs. Aubury smiled her quiet smile. Yes, it was much better to be open in matters of that sort. And was young Moriston likely to come to Abbot's Florey again soon? She had understood that he would have to come over to England when that affair of the professorship was decided.

"Oh! yes, I believe he is in London now, and may be here any day. I know Miss Alvisa is expecting him. I am not quite sure of the day, but it must be before long."

Then Linnet must be fetched home to the castle. Mrs. Aubury decided that as she wound the curtain fringes round her finger, and watched the sunlight flash and sparkle in her diamond betrothal ring.

“Unless,” Mrs. Flowerdale continued, “he goes up north to see his friends there. I believe he goes up regularly every year. Very dutiful of him. Most young men would have been only too glad to forget all about their low beginning.”

And Mrs. Flowerdale, who had never felt quite comfortable about the more than Egyptian darkness which shrouded Mrs. Aubury’s antecedents, thought this would be a favourable opportunity for making one more effort to penetrate it.

“And that reminds me, dear Mrs. Aubury, I heard the other day that young Moriston knew some friends of yours up there. I determined not to forget to tell you, for I was sure you would be so much interested. Of course, not that he would

be likely to be intimate with them—that is out of the question—but still the name might be familiar. Mr. Moriston is quite conscious of his position, and would never presume. But is it not curious that you should come so far away from home and yet find links in this quiet little village connecting you with it? They do say, however, that the world is not so very wide, after all."

In that moment Mrs. Aubury began to distrust—nay, more, to dislike—Mrs. Flowerdale. Here was a lady, and that lady the vicar's wife, who was evidently determined to find out something about her. And the vicar's wife was a woman who *could* find out things. And, moreover, she had got hold of this thread about young Moriston and Airdrie Muir. If she only reeled it off with sufficient ingenuity, what a very unpleasant opening out there might be before she came to the end! And what was to prevent her from

calling upon Miss Clerehart whilst the young man was there, and finding out all he knew? However, she was Mrs. Aubury, come what might. No one could deprive her of that dignity.

“ Oh! yes,” she replied, with no change of voice from the uninterested manner in which she had been talking over Keith Moriston’s disappointment, “ I have some friends up in that direction. At least, I used to have some, but I really should not like to be sure that they are there now. It is so very long since they have taken any notice of me that I do not care to intrude myself upon them. I have far too much pride to thrust myself upon those who wish to forget me.”

That was, as she felt, a good way of putting it. It implied that she was a sort of poor relation, whom it was convenient to forget, and it rather spoke up for her own dignity and independence, that being in her present position, which of course

was a great improvement upon that of the past few years, she had not cared to recall herself to the remembrance of those who, in the time of her adversity, had found it convenient to forget her. And Mrs. Flowerdale evidently accepted her version of it.

"Yes, Mrs. Aubury, I agree with you there. I should never choose to re-open any intimacy with people who had once shown a disposition to drop me. That is just what I said to Percy when he was presented to this living, and old Lady Lumborough, his godmother, who had never opened her heart to him any farther than a spoon and fork when he was quite a baby, began all at once to be so wonderfully friendly. I told Percy that, as she had let us alone when we were struggling for our bread and cheese in that little bit of a parsonage down in Hampshire, she might do the same now that we were able to afford a glass of port

with it. I do think that sort of thing, just dropping you and picking you up again, is so lowering."

Mrs. Aubury admitted, as though her case and that of Mrs. Flowerdale were analogous, that that sort of thing *was* very lowering. It showed such smallness of mind. And then she found it convenient to change the subject.

CHAPTER XV.

IT was the morning after the vicar's call. Mrs. Aubury, in the most charming of costumes bought for her by her husband in Paris on their way home, sat in the most comfortable of easy-chairs in the cosiest corner of the castle library. That used to be Mr. Aubury's corner, but he had given it up to his wife, or rather she had taken it as being her own place. For of course there were certain rights due to the lady of a house, and certain privileges which, not to assume from the beginning, argued a want of dignity. And Maria did not lack dignity of a sort, whatever else she lacked.

Also, if this reason had not been sufficient,—and, like the vicar's wife, Mrs. Aubury was a woman who went deeply into things,—she had to make up to herself now for all the years wherein she had eaten the bread and drunk the water of affliction ; the years during which the best seat, and the cosiest corner, and the most charming of morning costumes had not been by any means her portion ; years in which she had had to think chiefly about the wants of other people, and had done it patiently, too, though only for hire, and securing such small comfort as she could for herself meanwhile. One must think of all that.

Mrs. Aubury did not look very different from the Maria Plummersleigh who used to slip so quietly into any niche that happened to be vacant in the doctor's household ; who used to be equally ready to join in the conversation, or to drop out of it, as a certain admirable tact told her was

desirable; who used to retire with noiseless footstep when her presence was no longer required; who would take a hand at whist if necessary, or, if not necessary, would sit out alone, without the slightest appearance of feeling herself neglected. All that sort of thing was passed now, quite passed. Whatever else she might have to do, she would certainly not have to consider other people's convenience to the exclusion of her own any more, nor would she have to look out for vacant niches, and slip into them, nor would she need to watch the conversation up to a certain point and then withdraw, as being one too many. All these things would be done for her now, not by her. And she was minded that they should be done, too.

Still there was no marked alteration in her appearance, except that her dress was a little more costly, and her manner a shade more authoritative. Mrs. Aubury's

was not a face that expressed very keenly the sensation of satisfaction, though privation or restlessness of any kind soon wrote its story there; so did annoyance, and annoyance was at work this morning. For she had been proposing to Mr. Aubury that they should go across to the old vicarage, and bring Linnet back. Of course nothing else could be done, after what she had incidentally heard from Mrs. Flowerdale the day before.

Mr. Aubury assented as to the call, but held out a little as to the other proposition, at any rate for the present. And Maria knew that he was holding out against it, not as a newly-married man might have done, because of a very natural wish for the exclusive enjoyment of his wife's society. For, kind as he was, and gentle and thoughtful for her in every possible way, her woman's wit told her that the clear flame of a single, undivided love was not that which burned at their

fireside. True she gave no more than he did, and she knew it; but she desired to be supreme, and that desire made her chafe at an omission which yet did not make itself felt as a want. And, to compensate for this omission, she had convinced herself that he must at the least give double service in other ways. All, therefore, of thoughtful, chivalrous care that he could render was little enough, this being wanting.

She had also fathomed his character deeply enough to know that he was a man who could be made painfully conscious of his shortcomings. To know the right, and to do it, was the deepest desire of his life. Of his own deservings he would think little, almost nothing, so long as in any one single direction he did not give the uttermost that could be given. Upon this knowledge then, the knowledge that he did not love her with a passionate and all-mastering attachment, Maria Aubury

rested the lever of her authority over him. What she could not have demanded had they been perfect husband, perfect wife, she could demand, and did demand it too, because of that one respect in which he had scanted her rights.

And now, for the first time, she was feeling a resistance against the quiet, uplifting power of that authority. But the resistance was not to conquer.

“ You know, Owen, I have thought the matter over carefully, and I should very much prefer Linnet living with us.”

“ Afterwards perhaps, my dear, but why now?”

“ Because it is the most natural thing, Owen. She has always been your charge, and I should be very unwilling for people to think that I had entered the family to interfere with her happiness. It is the first thing that they *will* say when they find she is not at home with us.”

“ If it were interfering with Linnet’s

happiness, Maria dear, I would not hesitate one moment in bringing her back."

Mrs. Aubury looked up with a touch of sharpness. Was Linnet then so very much to be considered?

"But," he continued, "it is not interfering with that at all. I believe she is as happy as possible at the old vicarage."

"Perhaps so, Owen, my dear. But Linnet's happiness is not the only thing to be considered. Don't you think that mine ought to have just a little attention bestowed upon it?"

Mrs. Aubury said this with a show of playfulness, but the playfulness was not natural. Hers never was. One could see the sharpness underneath, like the wire which gives its bend to a spray of artificial flowers.

"Why should it affect your happiness, Maria? Tell me, and we will consider the matter over again. It might seem

more natural that the first few weeks of our married life should be spent alone."

But, kindly as he said this, there was no warm light in the look that he bent upon her. And Mrs. Aubury knew it, and dropped the large rounded lids over the eyes which had none to give either.

"I would even give up spending them alone together, Owen," she said, in a soft, quiet voice, "for the sake of doing what I felt to be right. You must not think that I am actuated only by what is pleasant to myself. It is my duty that I desire to follow. And I am sure that in bringing Linnet home we should be doing our duty, both of us."

That touched the right chord. What Mr. Aubury would not do for himself, what he would not do for his wife's asking, what he would not do for Linnet's happiness, he would do for duty. She saw by his silence, and by the thoughtful

look upon his face, that he was convinced.

“ She shall come, then, Owen dear ?”

“ Yes, Maria, if you think it is right.”

“ Then we will call for her this morning, and bring her home at once. I am sure you have been missing her dreadfully. When one is accustomed to the companionship of a bright young girl, it does make a great difference. And I would not be so selfish as to keep her away from you just for the sake of having you all to myself. Will you not believe me, Owen, when I say so ?”

“ It shall be as you please, Maria. The child is welcome there and welcome here. My only wish is to do what is best for her. Perhaps it would be as well to let her have her own choice.”

But that was not at all what Mrs. Aubury wished. Linnet in all probability would choose to stay with Miss Alvisa, and that meant being at the old vicarage when Keith came to it, and that meant

getting entangled with him, and hearing, perhaps, some things about Airdrie Muir which would be better unheard. Mrs. Aubury laughed, and laid her hand with a playful touch upon her husband's.

“Nay, you are going quite too far there, Owen dear. It is not well for girls like our little Linnet to be left to judge for themselves. It is safer that they should have brother Owens like *you* to judge for them. She will be better at home with us, much better.”

And Mrs. Aubury went to dress for that visit to Miss Alvisa. Now that her husband had given his consent, the sooner Linnet was home the better.

CHAPTER XVI.

FOR there was no telling when young Moriston would come back to Miss Alvisa. Mr. Aubury had been over to the old vicarage the night before, and had brought word home that he was visiting his friends in Scotland, and might return any day, or he might be two or three weeks. It depended upon a trip his little pupils were making. If they extended it, of course he would not be obliged to leave his friends up in the north so soon. He was enjoying the shooting there very much, he said, but still he should be very pleased to see his friends at Abbot's Florey

again, even though he did not bring them the news of his appointment to the Calcutta professorship.

Doubtless, now Mrs. Aubury came to think of it, that was why Miss Alvisa was so very anxious for Linnet to remain with her. Any impression which young Moriston might succeed in making on the girl would be strongly backed up by Miss Alvisa, who, as Mrs. Flowerdale very truly said, thought there was no one in all the world like her broad-shouldered shepherd-boy. And, indeed, if he had succeeded in obtaining the Indian appointment, and if there had been no awkward links connecting him with the scenes of her own early life, he would not have been at all an undesirable husband for a girl who had no fortune of her own to fall back upon.

But things being as they were, altered the case entirely. Whatever else Linnet did now, she must not marry Keith Moriston ; and, to prevent her committing her-

self in that direction, she must not be allowed to stay a day longer at the old vicarage, to which the very next train from Edinburgh might bring him.

Besides, her being shut up there with Miss Alvisa was very much against Mr. Burstborough's interests, and Mr. Burstborough now was making his intentions more evident than ever. Indeed there could not be the slightest doubt about them. And he had been so very disappointed when, coming over to the castle, he had found Linnet away.

Indeed he had almost suggested going to the old vicarage, but Mr. Aubury had not given him any encouragement, Miss Alvisa disliking to receive strangers, in consequence of her feeble state of health; though why she should enjoy having a young fellow like Keith Moriston hanging about all day, and not be able to admit a caller of Mr. Burstborough's easy, pleasant manners, Mrs. Aubury could not tell,

unless it was that she wished to keep Linnet from being impressed in any other direction.

Which was exceedingly short-sighted of her. For, even apart from his wealth, Mr. Burstborough was much more suitable in many respects than young Moriston. He could give her a home where she would be much more in the way of amusement and society, and he would enjoy, too, going about with her, whereas Mr. Moriston was one of those shy, unmannerly young men, who, when the novelty of marriage had worn off, would shut himself up amongst his books, and leave his wife to amuse herself as she could, by making sixpence go as far a shilling. An amusement in which Mrs. Aubury had once had considerable experience, and which in time was apt to become wearisome.

“And *you* shall mention it, Owen dear,” she said to her husband, as they set off to the old vicarage. “A proposition of that

kind will come so much better from you. I would not have Miss Alvisa think that I am interfering."

" You are never interfering, Maria, when you express an opinion which concerns Linnet's happiness. That is a subject on which you will always have a right to speak. The best right of anyone next to myself."

" Thank you, Owen. I am so glad you look at it in that way. I know my position is a difficult one, and I daresay many people are quite ready to find fault with me; but, so long as you are prepared to look at my conduct in a right light, I shall not be afraid. Still at the same time I should like you to open the subject."

" I should have thought it would have come better from yourself, Maria."

" No. I wish Miss Alvisa to understand clearly that you wish it. She would be sure to think that I had some personal motive. In my situation, Owen, I cannot

be too careful to avoid giving offence. I shall leave it to you."

" You feel sure that it is better for her to come home?"

" Quite sure. We shall feel more at home with each other if we begin at once. Besides, Linnet is at an age when she needs the supervision of some one who has more experience of the world than Miss Alvisa."

" Miss Alvisa is very sympathetic, Maria."

" Oh ! yes. I did not mean to say anything about that. And pray, Owen, do not think I want to prejudice you against Miss Alvisa, as if I would be so mean as to take advantage of my position in that way. No, what I mean is this, that though she is delightfully kind, and amiable, and intellectual, and all that sort of thing, still, having lived so completely within herself for so many years, she naturally forgets how things appear to those who have to

move in the midst of them. Now Linnet is one who needs practical guidance. Her own temperament pre-disposes her to that influence which Miss Alvisa unconsciously exerts, but it is not an influence which will qualify her for taking an active part in life. I am sure you must understand me."

"Yes. And we have settled it. I daresay it will be all right. At any rate, we can but try."

For of all things Mr. Aubury disliked argument. And where he was not thoroughly convinced of the correctness of his own opinions, he preferred to give them up, rather than fight for them. And certainly what his wife said had a fine colouring of common-sense about it.

Of course Miss Alvisa could raise no objection when Linnet was recalled, especially as the proposal came from Mr. Aubury, his wife only assenting brightly, and saying what a pleasure it would be to her

for her young sister to come home at once.

"For I know my husband misses her dreadfully, Miss Alvisa, though of course he will not say so to me, and I do so wish us all to feel at home with each other from the very beginning. It is so good of you to have had her with you whilst we were away. And, you know, she can come over whenever you like; you have only to send us word, and we shall be delighted to spare her to you. But just at present I do think it is so important for us not to be too much separated."

So Linnet came home, looking very bright and happy. For there had been a letter from Keith Moriston only that morning, and in it he had said,

"Tell Linnet that in a fortnight or three weeks I hope to be at Abbot's Florey again, for awhile, and then we will have some fishing down at the swan-pools. And tell her I hope we shall find that bit of willow-stump just where we left it last

time. I should not care for the swan-pools half so much, if that bit of stump were not there."

That was all, but Linnet knew how much it meant. It meant that Keith had not forgotten the happy moment when they two stood there, amongst the moon-lighted flag-leaves and whispering reeds ; that all which was true for him then, was true for him still ; that the future had something for them both, better than the past had ever given, sweet though that past had been.

How brightly Linnet's cheeks had flushed as Miss Alvisa read the message ! But Miss Alvisa said nothing. It was not her way.

Clearly nothing of the nature of an attachment in that direction, thought Mrs. Aubury to herself—the wish being father to the thought—noticing how cheerfully Linnet went about the house during those first days of her return. If she had

thought anything about him, she would have been down-hearted at his failure in the matter of the Indian appointment. But down-heartedness was not a word which could be mentioned in connection with such a light step and such bright, pleasant manners as she brought into the house with her. No, if there was any attachment at all, Mr. Burstborough seemed to be having the benefit of it. And evidently he thought so, too ; for his attentions were becoming more and more unmistakeable, and he lost no opportunity of coming over to the castle, and was to be found almost as frequently as poor young Moriston had ever been, down at the pools with his fishing-tackle, though, of course, Linnet did not go there alone so much now.

And really, if he did come forward with an actual proposal, Linnet could scarcely refuse him ; for her behaviour had been anything but that of a girl who wishes to

give a man to understand that his attentions are not agreeable. Either she was prepared to receive all that he had to offer, or she was proving herself a most unprincipled flirt ; and that could scarcely be believed of a girl so simple-minded, and who had seen so little of society.

But Mrs. Aubury said nothing of all this to her husband. He was a man who took singularly little notice of things that went on close around him. Mr. Burstborough might almost live at the castle before he would suspect that he meant anything by it. He just sat there in the library amongst his books, or mooned about over the farm with his dogs and his gun ; and, if there was anything important to be seen or done, one had to arouse him, as if out of a reverie, to give any attention to it. But still that want of observation, so long as he was willing to look at things when once they were placed clearly before him, was an advantage rather than otherwise.

Because, if there was one characteristic which Mrs. Aubury disliked, even more than the spirit of aggressive inquiry which reached such an inconvenient development in the vicar's wife, it was that silent, intuitive perception, that quiet quickness which sees without inquiring, and sees not action only, but the motives which have prompted to it. Such a quickness, she thankfully owned, was conspicuous only by its absence amongst all her husband's other good qualities.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE congratulatory calls being made and returned, Abbot's Florey began to busy itself with fitting hospitalities for the newly-married couple. The village had not been so gay for many a year. People of course waited for the vicar's wife to lead the way, which she did by a very choice little dinner-party, to which, besides the guests of honour and two or three of the people in the neighbourhood, Linnet and Mr. Burstborough were invited. They met again at Mrs. Polemont's, who of course had her dinner-party as soon as the vicar's was out of hand; and

shortly after that the hunt ball came on at Broadminster, to which, through Mr. Aubury's, or rather through his wife's influence, Mr. Burstborough received an invitation ; so that, if he did not follow up any success which he might already have gained in his matrimonial endeavours, it was not for want of opportunity.

Nor, as one or two people, amongst them Mrs. Aubury herself, remarked, for want of encouragement. Linnet seemed as if she were coming out in quite a new character. Perhaps it might be that bright hope whose accomplishment was so near now ; or it might be just the natural flush of excitement and pleasure consequent upon such an unexpected entrance into the splendours of society ; or the delight of seeing herself evening after evening in the pretty dresses which now, without any stint, she was allowed to choose at Hursley's for dining and dancing occasions ; but certainly Miss Aubury was

developing an appearance and manner which made her most popular at all the social entertainments within her reach.

That little blossom of coquetry, which had been nipped off before by the masterful hand of a real controlling love, was just springing forth again. She was conscious of a delight in her power to fascinate. There was a saucy pleasure in feeling that smiles of hers were sought for so eagerly that she had only to look bright and speak a merry word or two, to gather round her a knot of admirers who found in her fresh, unspoiled beauty a charm which the maturer, more sedate belles of Broadminster quite failed to produce. And because it was simply amusement to her, because, far down beneath it all, the one true earnest love of her life lay sweetly waiting, because she had neither thought nor purpose in it than just to be bright and charming, there was an ease and naturalness about her, an abandon of in-

nocent enjoyment which made her perfectly irresistible.

"I declare she is making quite a sensation," remarked the vicar's wife to Mrs. Polemont, as Linnet, in white gauze, garlanded over with dew-besprinkled ivy-leaves, was being guided by the delighted Mr. Burstborough through the mazes of a waltz. "Whoever else has to go without partners, you never see Miss Aubury taking the part of a wallflower. And really it seems only like yesterday that one used to meet her on the castle farm, with her petticoats kilted just, as I said, like a Scotch fishwife's, and Snip and Bobtail after her, scarcely rougher than she was herself. Mrs. Aubury certainly has effected a wonderful change,—transformation indeed, one might call it."

"Yes. But I was always sure that Linnet would enjoy society immensely, when once she got fairly afloat in it. You should have seen how delighted she was

with that little bit of an afternoon dance at the barracks. And everyone was asking to be introduced. You see, there is such a fascinating impetuosity about her. She goes in for it with all her heart. So different from those stiff cathedral girls. If I were a man, I would almost as soon dance with one of the statues on the west front as drag either of the dean's daughters through a waltz. I am sure it could not be much heavier. Linnet dances like a fairy."

"And smiles like the prettiest little coquette in Christendom," added Mrs. Flowerdale, who had her two nieces down for the hunt ball, and was noticing with a pang their lack of partners; though, if style could have done it, they were equal to the best in the room. "Would anyone have thought now she could have turned out in that way?"

"Oh! dear, yes. Linnet has fun and brightness enough for anything, only give

her a chance. You see, she never has had a chance yet. Mr. Aubury, poor, dear man! never went anywhere before he was married, and I don't suppose he would go anywhere now if it were not for his wife. He is as good as gold where kindness and attention are needed, but Linnet might have grown grey before ever it would have entered his head that she might not like to be as quiet as himself."

"Well, all I can say is, he is having it pretty strongly represented to him now."

"And why shouldn't he? I do like a young girl to have her proper share of everything that is going on. I remember how I used to enjoy these balls before I was married. And indeed I should enjoy them almost as much now, only George doesn't like me to waltz, and quadrilles are so slow, because of having to talk all the time. Linnet waltzes beautifully."

"Yes," said Mrs. Flowerdale, in rather a doubtful tone. "If she does not carry

it too far. Still I am very glad for her. I was rather afraid Mrs. Aubury might want to keep her as much shut up as she was before."

"Oh! dear, no." And little Mrs. Polemont fired up in her friend's behalf. "Mrs. Aubury would never do anything so unkind. She has a very strong sense of duty, and she feels quite like a mother to Linnet, *quite*, I assure you. She would do anything in the world for her."

"Mrs. Polemont, I would not for a moment insinuate anything to the contrary. That was not what I meant at all. My idea was that perhaps Mrs. Aubury might not feel it consistent to go so much into the world. You know, she gave herself so entirely to parish work before she married. But I daresay she looks upon it now in the light of a sacrifice required from her."

"I don't know, I am sure, what light she looks upon it in, but it will be a proper

light, whatever it is. And it would be a thousand pities to keep Linnet out of society, when she can add such a charm to it. I don't know, though, whether young Moriston would enjoy this sort of thing very much."

"Oh! Mrs. Polemont, there is nothing in that. Mrs. Aubury has told me so. And especially now that the appointment is settled. Mr. Aubury would never be so mad as to let his sister marry a penniless student. You see, the greater part of Miss Alvisa's income ceases with her life, and Linnet has not a sixpence unless her brother chooses to leave her something."

"Which he will, of course."

"I don't see any of course in it. When a man marries, it makes all the difference to what he may intend to do for a step-sister."

"Well, Mr. Burstborough makes no secret of his admiration, at any rate."

"He does not, and, if I were Mrs.

Aubury, I should just give the young lady a hint. If she is not intending to accept him, she is putting herself into a rather awkward position by encouraging him so decidedly. You see, not being accustomed to this sort of thing, she overdoes it just a little."

"I don't see. If he *will* follow her about so."

"My dear Mrs. Polemont, Mr. Burst-borough is far too much a man of the world to go on paying attentions without any hope of success being given him. And Linnet *is* giving him that hope. If it was anyone else, I should call it most decided flirting. Of course with a girl only just out, it makes a difference."

"I should think it does. Linnet knows about as much of flirting as my canary does. She is just enjoying herself, and nothing more. Mrs. Flowerdale, *do* not go and mention anything of the kind to Mrs. Aubury."

"I have no intention of doing so," said the vicar's wife, who felt it incumbent upon her to keep on good terms with the castle people. "If I have the opportunity, I may perhaps speak a quiet word to her myself, and tell her that she will get herself talked about if she is not careful, but no more than that. Oh! the child means no mischief, and, if they are both in one mind about it, well, it is all right. If they are not, I can only say I am very sorry."

And that was all. But in less than a week after the Broadminster Hunt Ball, Mr. Burstborough wrote to Mr. Aubury and asked if he might assure himself of that gentleman's favour and good-will in seeking, without more than necessary delay, the great honour of Miss Linnet Aubury's affections.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. AUBURY took counsel with his wife. For some reasons he would have felt more certain of sympathy and good advice from Miss Alvisa, but he had already found out that Mrs. Aubury was a lady whose claims could not be set aside without serious injury to that home peace which was so dear to him. Still she had common sense and penetration, and what she said about most family matters was generally worth listening to, the more so that romance or sentiment never interfered with her judgment.

“I am not sure that Mr. Burstborough

is exactly the man I should have fixed upon as a husband for Linnet," he said, turning the letter over and over as he and his wife sat in the library, which was generally the scene of their domestic consultations. "She seems to need something—well, I scarcely know how to express it, but to my idea there is a want about him in those points where she most needs sympathy."

Mrs. Aubury did not make haste to reply. That letter, or a visit tending to the same end, was what she had been expecting ever since the morning after the Hunt Ball, when Mr. Burstborough rode over from the cottage and really seemed as if he did not know how to get away again. His proposal gave her unmixed satisfaction, but still it was well not to appear to snatch at it, especially as Mr. Aubury's feelings were by no means enthusiastic. There was a sort of regretful look upon his face, as if now for the first

time the thought of parting with something closely cherished had been suggested to him.

“Of course, this is quite a new experience for you, Owen dear,” she replied, laying aside her embroidery that she might give the matter a more serious consideration. “One does feel very much at sea when anything is brought before one so unexpectedly.”

“That is just it, Maria.”

“And yet, you know,” she continued, “I do not think that we ought to call it unexpected. Mr. Burstborough has manifested his preference most unmistakably, and you have really made him so welcome at the house that he has already every reason to think that you look with favour upon his suit.”

“Then he is quite under a wrong impression. I have no thought of the kind.”

“That is because you take so little

notice, my dear. I have seen it from the very first."

"I wish you had mentioned it to me, Maria."

"I would if I had not thought that it must have suggested itself to you. And then, you know, really, Owen, you have made the way so open for him yourself, by inviting him to fishing and that sort of thing, that the poor man could scarcely help thinking that he was understood."

"I am very sorry. I had much rather this had not happened."

And the expression on Mr. Aubury's face deepened into pain—into something more, self-reproach. He was facing a new aspect of his duties towards Linnet, and facing them with the consciousness that they, too, like the others to which he had awakened before his marriage, had not been faithfully discharged. Mrs. Aubury watched him closely from under her long

light eyelashes. She could read the lingering self-reproach, the regret for not having seen in time. She must meet and conquer him upon this ground, his want of promptitude in seeing what was to be done, and then doing it.

“ You see, Owen dear,” she said, gently, “ if a thing of this kind is not to go on to its natural ending, it ought to be stopped at once. One should begin from the very beginning, or not begin at all. It is scarcely right to let a girl’s affections become engaged, and in behalf of a suitor, too, who has been so very open and straightforward as Mr. Burstborough, and then step in and say it must go no farther.”

“ Have you any reason to think they *are* engaged, Maria ?”

“ I have, Owen. At least, if one may judge from Linnet’s own behaviour. She has certainly given Mr. Burstborough every encouragement. She has never

looked so bright and happy as when he was by her side. She has invited his attentions by her cordial reception of them. She has allowed him, and so have you, to feel himself welcome at the house. And indeed I may say that I have done the same, for in doing so I quite thought I was following out your own wishes."

Mr. Aubury sighed. The world was almost too much for him, little as he had to do with it.

" You have better opportunities than I have, Maria, of judging of these things. It may be as you say."

" I have, Owen dear. A woman generally does see such things more quickly than a man. She judges by a thousand little signs which his logic never reaches. And I don't think Linnet is a girl who would receive the attentions of any gentleman, simply for the sake of making a display of them, and then throwing him over. She is far too honourable for that. In-

deed she would have little of your disposition if she could behave so. And Linnet is a true Aubury."

"I hope so."

"And I am sure so. Well, then, as she has accepted so much from Mr. Burstable, I should take it as an indication that she is prepared to accept still more; at any rate, that she is favourably disposed."

"So I must write and tell him he is welcome to her."

"No, nothing of the sort. I should not commit yourself to action in one direction or another. Above all things, I should not press the subject upon her."

For Mrs. Aubury guessed that, if such a course were pursued, Linnet would fling the whole thing aside; and that, in the very face of Keith Moriston's return, would be so awkward.

"Leave it to time, Owen. There is no need to be in a hurry. I don't see how,

under present circumstances, you can act otherwise."

"Linnet must know about it, Maria."

"Oh! dear, no, nothing of the sort. You certainly have no right to give Mr. Burstborough an unfavourable answer, without first finding out Linnet's own feelings on the matter; but it would be a great pity to spoil the ease and simplicity of her manners towards him by telling her the subject of his letter. Let things develop themselves naturally. It will all come right in due time."

"Yes, but if Linnet has no consciousness of anything of the kind, and so goes on innocently encouraging him until it is too late for either of them to withdraw."

"My dear Owen, you judge Linnet wrongly if you think she is so ignorant as that. A girl of eighteen, even if she has scarcely ever been into society at all, has perceptions which infallibly preserve her

from such a mistake. Linnet *does* know what Mr. Burstborough means."

"Then why not let them both come to an understanding about it?"

Mrs. Aubury looked annoyed. Who would have thought this quiet man had so much fight in him, that he would take so much turning round upon such a simple subject?

"Well, Owen, I can only tell you what seems to me the most honourable and straightforward course of action. You have allowed Mr. Burstborough to come to the house until he is hopelessly in love with Linnet. She cannot help seeing what he means, but it does not at all follow that her own mind is so sufficiently made up on the subject as to allow her to commit herself to such an important thing as marriage. If she is already favourably impressed, and I quite believe she is, your duty to her is to give her time to consider that impression, and not hurry her into

action from which there is no retreat."

"Then the whole thing is just where it was before. And how is the letter to be answered?"

"In this way. Write to Mr. Burst-borough, and say that you leave matters in his own hands. You give him leave to come to the house as usual, but you think it better not to disturb Linnet's mind by speaking to her yourself upon the subject. It is your wish to leave her perfectly free to act according to her own feelings. I do not think you can do more wisely than that."

The expression on Mr. Aubury's face now intimated that he thought his wife a sensible woman.

"You see," she continued, "that pledges neither Linnet nor yourself to anything definite."

"Except, perhaps, that, if he does propose to her, I can now place no obstacle in the way."

“ And why should you ?”

“ I really do not know, except that, as I said before, Mr. Burstborough is not exactly the sort of husband I should have chosen for her. At least——”

And that look of painful indecision returned. To act where only self-sacrifice was required from him, would have been so easy. The impulse prompting to that was one which he never disobeyed. To act where the well-being of another lay in his hands, and no light of duty guided, or sudden mighty wind of impulse swept him in the right direction, was so difficult. He was silent. Mrs. Aubury looked at him keenly.

“ Owen.”

“ Yes, Maria.”

“ Are you thinking of Keith Moriston ?”

Mr. Aubury started. His wife had touched the very truth. And yet he hardly knew why the young man should be so present to his mind just then ; for

certainly he had never linked Keith and Linnet before, even in his thoughts, as husband and wife.

"Well, I was just wondering, Maria—indeed, I can scarcely say so much as that."

"You were wondering whether there was any feeling of that sort between them."

"I scarcely know what I was wondering, Maria. It is all so indistinct."

"Perhaps I can represent your thoughts to you better than you can represent them to yourself. I know I have the power of reading them sometimes, and I felt sure that you were vexing yourself about him. But there is no need, Owen. Linnet would never have allowed Mr. Burstborough to go so far as he has gone, if she were not prepared for what is to follow. She would still less have accepted his attentions, if she had been cherishing the slightest preference for anyone else. You must not judge her so harshly as to

think that. It is not Linnet's nature to do anything so utterly unworthy."

"I believe you are right, Maria," said Mr. Aubury, passing his hand wearily across his brow. "It is very hard sometimes to make a decision. If I could only feel sure that I was doing the wisest thing in not mentioning the subject to Linnet. If she really thinks nothing about him, it would end it."

Which would be most undesirable for Mrs. Aubury's purposes.

"Owen dear, I don't think you have any right to assume either one thing or another. If Linnet really does not care for him, he will find it out in time, or he can give her the opportunity of saying so to himself, which will be the most satisfactory thing. You cannot act more wisely than by just leaving it in his own hands."

Accordingly Mr. Aubury, anxious above all things to do what was right, but with none of the satisfaction which arises from

having seen and done it, went to his table and wrote a note to Mr. Burstborough, telling him that he was at liberty to press his own suit, and receive such answer as Linnet had in her heart to give.

CHAPTER XIX.

WITH a tolerably effective personal appearance, a handsome residence, a well-appointed establishment, a fortune continually increasing in consequence of successful railway contracts, and, above all, a tolerably good conceit of himself, there was no need for Mr. Burstborough to feel at all uncomfortable as he opened that note and found that Linnet's guardian placed matters very much in his own hands.

And he did not feel uncomfortable. Far from it. What he could give to any lady fortunate enough to win his favour placed

him quite beyond the likelihood of a humiliating refusal. And though little Miss Linnet had a comfortable enough home at present, and a very nice position, still both depended upon her brother's good will, or perhaps, to speak more correctly, upon the good will of Mrs. Aubury. For when a man married in middle life for the first time, and married a woman of strong sense and resolute will too, she was generally able to do pretty much what she liked with him. Therefore, if the wife and the sister did not get on harmoniously together, so much the worse for the sister.

Besides, Mr. Burstborough felt that he had done on the whole rather a noble thing in allowing his affections to find their present resting-place. It was not every man in his position who would have put money so entirely out of the question in searching for a wife. And he had not done so from necessity. There were young ladies, not a few in Broadminster,

young ladies of family and fortune, too, in whose homes he was a welcome guest, and why so welcome, he asked himself, but for that halo of interest which surrounds the unmarried man who may develop into a lover? A lover, too, who would have no need to keep his lady-love waiting until he had prepared a suitable home for her. No. As Mr. Burstborough folded up that note and laid it carefully away, he felt that Linnet was a fortunate girl—fortunate in that she was sought for herself alone, and so songht by a man who, had he been otherwise minded, might have looked for both wealth and fashion in his wife.

And he had nothing to fear from Mrs. Aubury. He had known her for some time. She was a woman of considerable penetration and worldly wisdom, and exceedingly fond of supremacy. So fond of it indeed, that he did not think, to attain it more fully in her present home, she

would object to a speedy and comfortable settlement for her pretty young step-sister. Comfortable of course, for marrying was a serious thing, look at it how you would, but if comfortable and speedy too, why then so much the better.

And that made Mr. Burstborough think that the little difficulty which had been lingering in his mind ever since he saw Miss Aubury and young Keith Moriston down by the swan-pools that Wednesday evening, nearly two months ago, might now be allowed to vanish entirely. Now that the professorship question had settled itself, the poor fellow was driven forth on the ocean of tutorship, with neither port nor haven of emolument to which he might steer with reasonable prospect of reaching it before middle life. And if Mr. Aubury, meditative, unpractical man that he was, would give his consent to an engagement like that, Mrs. Aubury would not, for she had known herself what small-

ness of means meant, and what a very uncomfortable thing it was. And she had said to him herself one day, as they were strolling round the castle garden, that she hoped, when Linnet married, she would not be exposed to anything of the sort. Which was really putting young Moriston out of the running entirely, if one might use such an expression in matters matrimonial.

But he should act leisurely. There was no need to appear over-anxious. Mr. Aubury's reply had entirely freed him from the risk of repulse in that direction. Of Mrs. Aubury's good-will he was tolerably certain. And Linnet's manner, if lacking that shy consciousness which he felt would be so charming, was still sufficiently marked to warrant the assurance that she was prepared for further advances. The only thing now was to decide for himself how and when those advances should be made.

A bright thought occurred to him. He had received—indeed he felt it was only reasonable that, in his position, he should have received—considerable attention from the ladies of Abbot's Florey during his summer stay there, especially from ladies who had grown-up daughters. And he proposed to himself discharging the obligations thus incurred by a magnificent picnic to the Abbot's Florey woods before his return to Broadminster. Such a picnic as the village had never seen since picnics had a being at all. And he should avail himself of the occasion, not only abundantly to repay the hospitalities of his courteous entertainers, but to show them in what direction he had disposed of his heart and hand. Time, place, and opportunity would then be at his own choice. In a quiet walk, which could easily be arranged during the progress of the festivities, he would secure from Miss Aubury's

own lips her recognition of the favour he was prepared to bestow upon her; and, that done, it would be easy so to make her the guest *par excellence* that no further doubt should remain on the minds of the rest of the company as to what had taken place.

The time was now towards the end of October, but a late season was still giving the woods possession of all their autumn glory. Mr. Burstborough took counsel with Mrs. Aubury, who thought that the fifth of November would not be too late a date to fix upon. Invitations were issued accordingly, and before three days had elapsed nearly forty guests had accepted, amongst whom were the castle people, Mrs. Flowerdale and her two nieces, who extended their already long visit a week in order to be present, the two Miss Laudervilles, Dr. and Mrs. Polemont, the curate, a few of the younger officers from the barracks, and some Broadminster gentle-

men, necessary to qualify the excess of ladies from Abbot's Florey.

Both Mr. Burstborough and Mrs. Aubury wisely allowed a few particulars to struggle out relative to the scale on which the entertainment was to be conducted. The Broadminster quadrille band was engaged. There was to be a luncheon at one, then the guests were to disperse at their own pleasure, various little amusements being provided in the meantime, until four-o'clock tea, after which there was to be a dance, followed by supper, and a display of fireworks. The picnic was to take place in a lovely bit of woodland on the outskirts of the Duke of Moreland's park, and tents with elaborate fittings and decorations were to be provided, so that stress of weather, if it came, might not be permitted to interfere with the gaiety of the proceedings.

“Perfectly delightful, is it not?” said little Mrs. Polemont, who set off to the

castle at once upon receiving her invitation, to hear all about it. "I just looked in upon Mrs. Flowerdale as I passed, and she says it is to be the grandest thing of the kind that has ever been given in this neighbourhood. I tell George it means a new dress, and he says I may have one, for Mr. Burstborough is a man who takes a great deal of notice of that sort of thing. I am sure he will like us all to go in our best. The two Miss Levertons are having theirs down from London—just fancy that! And Frisby from Broadminster is supplying the luncheon and supper, Mrs. Flowerdale says. Is that really true?"

"Oh! yes, quite. In fact, Mr. Burstborough is sparing no expense. He has asked me to help him about it, for you know a lady can suggest so many little elegancies, and I have promised to do all I can to make it pass off successfully. I am sure it is quite too good of him."

"Not at all. It is the only way in

which he can return all the kindness that has been shown to him here. But, Maria, my belief is that he is doing it entirely to please Linnet. I remember, as well as can be, that evening you were dining at our house, Linnet saying to him how delightful it would be to have a picnic before the autumn colours got off the woods. She said she had never been to a real picnic in her life, and she thought it must be such fun. Ever since then he has been talking about places that would be suitable to go to. And now, you see, he is doing it. Maria, has he made up his mind, I wonder?"

Maria could have said something about that, Mr. Burstborough having confided to her the why and the wherefore of this unwonted burst of magnificence; but she was not a woman who ever said more than was necessary, and especially to little Mrs. Polemont, who was such a gad-about, though in the most innocent and pleasant

manner possible. She only admitted that, if Mr. Burstborough really was doing it with a view to Linnet's enjoyment, it was very attentive of him.

“Attentive indeed! I should call it a great deal more than that. Why, it is proclaiming his devotion all over the place. Maria, I dare wager any number of pairs of kid-gloves that long before this time next year we shall be giving bridal parties to Mr. and Mrs. Burstborough, and Linnet will be the bride. You know, I did think at one time that she would have gone in a different direction, but perhaps she is doing better for herself. And certainly that young Moriston is in no hurry to get away from his people in Scotland. It does not look as if he were very anxious about pressing his claims. Perhaps he has heard something. Do you think Miss Alvisa ever tells him how things are going on?”

“I really do not know, Isabel. I should hope Miss Alvisa's letters are on more im-

portant matters. Young Moriston ought to have quite other things to think about now than what Linnet is doing."

"Well, perhaps. But I am quite sure that one time he did think a great deal about her. And I quite had the impression that she was not unmindful of it. But one may be very much mistaken about such things."

"One may, Isabel. And it is sometimes wiser not to say too much about them."

"You are such a sage, Maria. I never could hold my tongue about anything, and so I have given over trying. But I do hope, whoever Linnet marries, she will be happy. Is she going to have a new dress for the picnic? We might go over and choose them together. I am going to have the loveliest myrtle-green. I saw it at Hursley's the other day, and it went to my heart at once, only, of course, I had no excuse for buying it then. George says I may have it now, if I like. Linnet ought

to have a good warm colour, to set off her rich complexion."

And with that Mrs. Polemont went into the wide question of basques, and jackets, and long or short skirts, and the sort of costume that would be prettiest for dancing.

"A good-natured little butterfly," thought Mrs. Aubury, to herself, as she listened patiently; "as frivolous as possible, but with not a bit of spite in her composition. It is fortunate that she has a husband of good, strong common-sense, who can think and act for her in matters of importance."

CHAPTER XX.

PERHAPS Mrs. Aubury thought, too, that it was well for her husband that he had married a wife who could think and act for him in matters of importance ; for his anxieties respecting the disposition of Linnet's hand were not to end with the writing of that letter which had caused Mr. Burstborough such unmixed satisfaction.

Less than a week after it had been sent, there came one addressed to Mr. Aubury in strange handwriting, and bearing a strange postmark, the postmark of Airdrie Muir. And this letter was from Keith

Moriston, asking for himself the same liberty which had been granted to Mr. Burstborough.

Mrs. Aubury, who generally looked over the letters as they were taken out of the bag, had noticed that postmark, and had formed her own theory as to the contents of the missive which bore it. And that her theory was a correct one she gathered from the expression of mingled perplexity and regret which overspread her husband's face as he read it.

“Are you troubled again?” she asked, as he turned the letter over and over, looking away, meanwhile, past the big old yew-tree to the gables of the old vicarage, whither he could no longer go for any help and comfort. “Is it more about Linnet?”

For reply he gave her the letter, which she read through in silence, then laid it down on the little work-table at her side.

The look of regret grew deeper on her husband's face. He had never as yet been able to feel that he had done the right thing as regarded that other letter, but still he had done what he thought was best. And what he had done was for no purpose of his own.

"What are Mr. Keith Moriston's means, Owen dear?" was Mrs. Aubury's exceedingly matter-of-fact question, after reading her husband's countenance carefully.

"Means, Maria? I really cannot say. I am sure I do not know what Lord Stor-mont gives him."

"Oh! I am not thinking of what Lord Stor-mont gives him. That is quite a temporary thing, and, of course, leads to nothing else. I mean as regards his pro-perty, or his prospects, or his expectations, or however you may put it."

"I don't know that he has any at all, Maria."

"Indeed! Is that really so?"

"It is, for anything I know to the contrary."

"Then, Owen, I must say I think it is presumptuous of him to make such a request."

Mr. Aubury said nothing. He was feeling very disappointed. Something told him that Keith Moriston would have made Linnet more truly happy. And Keith was the young brother in whom he could have felt such a real interest. How gladly he would have helped them both! And how much more proudly he could have received this penniless student into his family than the wealthy contractor, whose beautiful residence in the suburbs of Broadminster was only waiting for the finish which a bride like Linnet might supply.

"I don't think it is presumptuous, Maria. He knows quite as much of her as Mr. Burstborough did. You know they saw a

great deal of each other when he was staying with Miss Alvisa."

"That does not alter the case at all, Owen. It only makes it worse. The more he saw of Linnet, the more he ought to have known that such a life of straitness and uncertainty as lies before him is not the life for her to share, tenderly cared for and sheltered as she has been by you."

"Maria, I believe the woman whom Keith Moriston marries will never need either tenderness or shelter. She may have to do without wealth, but many a girl has made up her mind to that. And he has as much right to plead his own cause as Mr. Burstborough."

"Owen dear, how can you say so? It would be no kindness to Linnet to expose her to the trials of a long engagement, and a long engagement is what she most certainly would have to go through if she became entangled with this young man.

It is most fortunate that your letter to Mr. Burstborough has decided that matter."

"I promised nothing to Mr. Burstborough, Maria."

"No, but you did what amounts to the same thing. You gave him to understand that there was no obstacle in the way of his winning Linnet's affection, and it would be rather dishonourable to him now to go and give another equal privileges. I am sure you would see it so if you were to place yourself in his position, and ask yourself how you would feel."

"The question is, Maria, what right have I to prevent him from saying what he wishes to say?"

"Simply this, that you have given the permission to another. And at present Mr. Burstborough, acting upon that permission obtained from you, is behaving in such a manner as to compromise both himself and Linnet, if nothing comes of it."

"Maria, you seem to see these things very clearly. I am not convinced, and yet I acknowledge the justice of what you say."

"And I am sure you will be right, Owen, in acting accordingly."

"Maria, I will leave it to you. Being a woman yourself, I suppose you know better than I do what a woman thinks about such things. Will you reply to the letter?"

"Certainly I will," said Mrs. Aubury, getting up at once and going to the writing-table; for it was her principle that when a thing had to be done it was better done forthwith. "I have not the slightest hesitation in my own mind as to what is the right course to pursue. Even putting aside the question of what is your duty to Mr. Burstborough, you will only confuse Linnet's mind and place her in a very painful position by introducing this new interest."

“But it must be introduced, Maria. She must know.”

“No, Owen, she must not. You have every reason to believe now, from her own behaviour, that she is favourably disposed—much more than favourably disposed—to Mr. Burstborough. She has admitted him to a degree of intimacy, and she has received marks of preference from him, which would be simply impossible if she cherished the least feeling for anyone else. As you say, being a woman myself, I know how women feel about these things, and Linnet is far too noble-minded to mislead a man by such behaviour as she is showing now. You ought not to believe it of her.”

“Let it be so, then. Write to Mr. Moriston.”

“Yes, and you shall see my letter, and then we can make any alterations which you may think fit, I can write it better alone. Or, no,”—and Mrs. Aubury took

back those last words, her husband might go away, and, in his present unsettled state, seek Linnet, and tell her all about it, which would be entirely undesirable—"I would rather you stayed, Owen dear, and then I can consult you if I feel any difficulty. I see clearly enough what ought to be said, but you may perhaps help me in saying it."

Mr. Aubury stayed. There was silence for a time. Apparently Mrs. Aubury had not found any difficulty in expressing herself, for after a very few minutes she showed him the letter.

It was courteous, brief, and to the point. It stated that both she and her husband were very sorry that Linnet was not in a position now which would make it honourable for Mr. Aubury to grant Mr. Moriston's request. Indeed he had probably misinterpreted her behaviour in supposing that it indicated the preference upon which he had been building his hopes of success.

And they were both very sorry for him, but they hoped what had taken place would not at all affect the friendly feeling which had hitherto existed between them.

It was a kindly letter, with nothing in it to wound him needlessly ; nothing but expressions of regret and sympathy. But it implied that Linnet was as good as engaged, if not quite engaged, to some one else.

“I don’t think I could have put it differently, Owen dear,” Mrs. Aubury said, as her husband returned the letter to her, and then began to pace up and down the room, that look of hopeless doubt and perplexity still upon his face. “I have tried to make it as little unpleasant to him as possible. Perhaps it might have been as wise if I had said that we thought his proposal just a little presumptuous, his prospects being so uncertain, or, as you express it, not existing at all ; but it is no use vexing him when the thing is settled.

I always think a refusal is best given as gently as possible. However it is worded, it must of necessity bring great pain."

"It must," said Mr. Aubury. "Poor Keith Moriston! I am very sorry for him."

"And so am I, Owen. But, in a case like this, one cannot help putting the suffering somewhere. Clearly Linnet cannot give them both what they want. And it is our duty to consult her welfare. We cannot judge what is best for them. We can in some small measure judge what is best for *her*."

"Well, Maria, we have done it."

But Mr. Aubury felt as strongly as ever, though he was quite unable to map out the thing clearly and distinctly before him, that, in bidding Mr. Burstborough do what he could for himself, he had not followed the right course, and that, in dashing away the cup of hope from Keith Moriston's lips—Keith with his big brain, and his

warm heart, and his scanty means—he had taken the wrong one. But then he was in that state of mind when, whichever course is taken, the one which is abandoned seems the better. As he said to himself, if the thing could be reversed, he should probably have the same feeling for Mr. Burstborough which he now had for Keith Moriston, upon whom so heavy a disappointment was so soon to fall. As his wife very pertinently remarked, trouble must be laid at one or other of their doors.

And then her confidence somewhat assured him. There was no shadow of doubt on Mrs. Aubury's face as she laid the letter away in her desk, ready to be posted. It was better not to leave it lying about, as, if Linnet came in and saw it, the address might provoke inquiry. Perhaps better still would it be to have it posted at once.

“Owen dear,” she said, putting the letter in her pocket, “I believe it would

do me good if you would take me out for a walk. This affair has rather pained me. I want a little fresh air."

"Very well, dear," he replied, always keenly sensitive to any need of hers that he could supply, knowing that what surely must be the deepest of all he never could meet. This watchful tenderness it was which made almost everyone in Abbot's Florey say what a model husband Mr. Aubrey was, what a happy woman his wife must be. "Shall we take a turn round the farm, or upon the moor?"

"No; not upon the moor. The wind there always brings back that horrid neuralgia. I should like to go quietly down the village, where there is more shelter. And let us start at once. Just ring, will you, for Tidy to bring my things?"

Which Tidy did, and they set out at the gentle, half-invalid pace which, since her marriage, had become almost habitual with

Mrs. Aubury. It was an indulgence which she was able to allow herself now. Not that she needed it, but never having been taken care of very much in her life before, and having had chiefly to consider how to take care of other people so as to make herself necessary to them, it was pleasant to feel that at last the tables were turned, and that she could command, as permanent duty from another, what had formerly been given as hired service by herself. And then Mr. Aubury was just the man, everyone said, who delighted to wait upon a woman. It did one good to see his carefulness and solicitude.

“Thank you, dear,” she said, as he wrapped a costly sable rather more closely round her throat. “I feel the air refreshing me already. You do not know how having to write a letter of that kind takes the life out of me. I do so shrink from giving pain to anyone. I brought it with me, thinking we might perhaps go as far

as the post. I think I could manage that, and then we will turn back."

"Should we go in to Miss Alvisa on our way home, Maria, and tell her about it? I suppose she is sure to hear, sooner or later, from Keith Moriston himself."

"Oh! no, Owen dear, nothing of the sort. You would be doing a most unwise thing. Nothing more is necessary now than complete silence. I do not think young Moriston is likely to mention it. Men do not speak of things of that kind, even to their nearest friends, nor like them spoken of. And I do not think we ought to put him to any unnecessary humiliation."

"Of course not, Maria. I was not looking at it in that light. You certainly are very clear headed."

"I generally know what I think the right thing to do, Owen, if that is what you mean; and when it is done, I leave it. Let us do so with this."

So saying, Mrs. Aubury dropped the letter into the post, and they came quietly home.

She was content now. She had no doubt that she had done the best for Linnet in deciding which of her suitors should be accepted. And she would not hide from herself that she should be better content when the young girl was married. She felt that it was her own right to be first, and, so long as Linnet remained at home, she was not first. True, her husband was kindness, gentleness, consideration itself; but it was to Linnet that he always turned for sympathy in what interested him most deeply. It was upon Linnet that his eye rested with the warm light of protecting love. It was when he spoke to Linnet that his voice took its tenderest tone. All a wife's honour was given to herself, but the yearning affection, which had its roots far down in the memories and associations of past years, belonged to

the young girl over whom he had watched as a father watches his child.

And a sense of wrong was growing up in Mrs. Aubury's mind, which made her anxious that Linnet should marry before any unpleasantness actually arose between them. She felt it must come sooner or later, and with it the comfort of the house would depart. Mr. Burstborough could prevent all that, and would do so now.

As for Mr. Moriston, he was not the only young man who had aimed a little too high and found himself the worse for it. And in doing what she felt would make him henceforth a stranger at the castle, she had done nothing which would make him an enemy to herself. For the refusal had been so gently worded that her part in it could only win respect from him. And if he did know anything now with reference to her own early associations, a feeling of gratitude to her would close his lips upon it, for she had written

with pity and graciousness the words which, shaped by another, might have brought him such sore humiliation.

CHAPTER XXI.

SO Keith read the letter, read it up there amongst the Airdrie moors, where, years ago, a rough little shepherd lad, he had tended his flocks and spelled out his Shakespeare from a ragged copy which the village schoolmaster had lent him.

And, as he read the letter, there swelled up in his heart a flood of righteous anger against the girl who, loving him not—nay, loving another all the time—had yet let her hand rest in his, her eyes give back look for look of love, as they two stood amongst the hazel-trees in the moonlight, he thinking, fool that he was, that she was for him alone.

Ten days from that time he came down to Miss Alvisa, but not to spend the month which had been spoken of. Instead, he came on the afternoon of one day, and left on the morning of the next, saying that his pupils wanted him again at once. And he never even went over to the castle, nor asked about Linnet, nor seemed to care for any mention of her.

Miss Alvisa wondered. Something had gone wrong. She had the quick insight which sympathy gives to those who live for others—an insight as different from the mere sharpness of curiosity as the clear golden light of the sun to the brightness of a farthing candle. She never asked questions, nor did she assume it her right to know what went on in the lives of others, save as she could know it to help and comfort. But she had noted the quick change which passed into Linnet's voice if the girl did but speak of Keith Moriston; the way in which she hovered, as a bird above its

nest, round subjects which had any connection with him ; the happy light which brightened her eyes, and then downcast them, if he looked long enough into her face. And she knew what it meant, for she had lived through it all herself long ago, and its very memory had left a joy which nothing could take away. And, noting it, she held her peace, hoping that the light of love was arising upon these two young hearts.

And, woman-like, she had been making her own little plans and purposes for this coming visit, a visit which she felt might give them to each other. Keith had spoken so decidedly about staying for a month when he came again. There was such hidden joy and gladness in his letters. She could read between the lines the hope that filled his heart. And now he had been and he was gone, and not a word had been said of Linnet, not even an inquiry made ; and that silence told its own story.

Some great change had come. For the child, going in only the morning of Keith's arrival, had heard of his coming, and the light had flashed up unbidden to her eyes, and the happy colour to her cheeks, and her step, as she went down the path towards the dingle, had the springing quickness which only comes of hope.

Not Linnet's fault, then, but whose? And there Miss Alvisa had to pause, and wait until the shadow cleared away.

For Linnet knew nothing of the letter that had been sent to Keith Moriston. When Mr. Aubury recurred to the subject, as he had done once or twice, suggesting to his wife that it was only right she should know what had been done on her account, Mrs. Aubury strongly reprehended any mention of it to her. She argued that as Linnet's affections were not concerned in the matter, and that as she had not been told of Mr. Burstborough's proposals, it would be giving Mr. Moriston an unfair advantage if he were

even allowed the pity which might perhaps develop into a warmer feeling. Because Linnet was a girl who would probably think little of mere worldly advantages, whilst her romantic temperament would dispose her towards anyone who had been repulsed for her sake, even though at first her feeling towards him had been one of indifference. And besides, it was not advisable to let a young girl know that she was the object of so much attention. It might tend to spoil the simplicity of her manner, and change her too soon into the artificial belle of society.

Mr. Aubury could see the force of that argument, and he yielded to it, as indeed he did now to most of his wife's arguments, she having, in matters of this kind, a clearness of penetration and a power of decision which, to a man anxious to do right, yet with no light upon the special thing to be done, was a relief, even though it might commit him to actions which he could not understand.

So Linnet dreamed on, joyful in the thought that Keith Moriston was coming so soon, and winning such brightness in that very thought, letting so much of it ray out in face and voice and manner that Mr. Burstborough, who never missed opportunities of being a guest at the castle farm, took for granted that he must have something to do with it. He had now quite arranged at what stage of the picnic he should acquaint Miss Aubury with the state of his feelings, and how he should afterwards so behave as to manifest unmistakably to the other guests that she was the maiden upon whom he had fixed his choice. And no thought that her reply could be other than a favourable one disturbed the eagerness with which he now, ably assisted by Mrs. Aubury, carried forward the preparations for the entertainment.

The bright autumn days went on, each one lending new brightness to Linnet's hopes; and the falling autumn leaves

brought no sadness to her heart, and the shortening autumn days no chill, for did not every leaf that fell, and every day that hurried more quickly to its twilight, speed that day of days, when Keith Moriston should come back, to say all that had been left unsaid before? And never had those autumn leaves looked so golden, and never the October light showed so soft and mellow, as when that day at last had really come, and Linnet started for the old vicarage, carrying with her the finest cluster of grapes that could be gathered from the castle greenhouses, as an offering to Miss Alvisa.

For Mrs. Aubury knew that young Moriston was returning that afternoon, and though she inferred that, under the circumstances, he would scarcely be likely to call upon his friends at the castle, still it would be just as well for Linnet not to go to the old vicarage during his stay there, as she very probably might have done, not know-

ing anything of what had happened. And this visit to take Miss Alvisa the grapes, just safely clearing, as it did, and no more than clearing, his arrival, would dispense with the need of any further civilities on their part until his departure, when things might go on again as usual.

As she came along, Linnet had gathered some leaves of Virginian creeper, now at their reddest, and, as soon as she reached Miss Alvisa's room, she laid hands upon a quaint old china dish and began to arrange the fruit in it, wreathing it with the crimson red sprays, and for shade some darker leaves from the beech-tree on the lawn. Her fingers loitered long over the work. It was so pleasant as she stood there to hear Miss Alvisa talk about Keith, and all they should do whilst he was there.

"I shall expect you to come very often, Linnet. He is sure to bring quantities of new books, and he will not be content unless you give us your opinion of them.

In his last letter he spoke of making only a very short stay, but still we must have some cosy readings together, and then we have the Swiss photographs to look over. I told him to bring me a good selection, and it is so much more interesting to have them explained by some one who has really seen the places. Of course I shall wait until he has been in to call upon you all, before I fix any time for you to come over, but I do not think he will lose much time before offering his congratulations to Mr. and Mrs. Aubury."

"Oh! yes, I forgot. Brother Owen has been married since Mr. Moriston was here. That makes it seem such a long time ago. I was thinking everything would be just the same as it was before."

And Linnet gave a little sigh, chased away by the thought that, if things were not just the same now as they were before, they would by-and-by be so much better. And it was this thought that was shining in

her happy eyes as she stooped over Miss Alvisa's sofa and kissed her for good-bye.

She came home through the dingle for the sake of passing the swan-pool, and staying for a moment by the bit of willow stump which overhung the water. Every little fibre of moss upon it was familiar to her now, every stalk of weed and sedge which the current swayed to and fro beneath it. So soon, so very soon, they would stand there together again, and then how perfect it would be!

Linnet pictured it all to herself. Yet could anything be more beautiful than that little moment which was only a memory now? Yes; for that which lay in the future was touched with hope and mystery. A light was upon it—the light which never was on land or sea, that rosy dawn beneath which not old earth wakes up to another weary day of her everlasting round, but the soul to its new life, that life

compared with which all that it knows before is but shadow and twilight.

Stooping to gather one of the little stems of moss, a rustling in the path behind made her start, and Mr. Burstborough leaped the low fence.

Linnet's face flushed. It seemed almost as if he must have read her thoughts, so real and vivid had they become. That gave a touch of shyness and embarrassment to her manner as she reached out her hand to him, which was just what Mr. Burstborough had been looking for so long, and which cleared away the last lingering doubt, if ever doubt there had been, of her feelings for him.

CHAPTER XXII.

“GOOD afternoon, Miss Linnet. How very fortunate ! Really, anyone might think we had arranged it,” he said, with a pleasant, confidential smile, looking down into Linnet’s face as the colour came and went upon it.

And perhaps some one else did think it had been arranged, for just then a figure passed quickly by the little open bit in the hedge, but not too quickly to note the couple loitering there in the shelter of the hazel-bushes, by the mouldering willow trunk.

It was Keith Moriston, on his way from

the station to Miss Alvisa's house, reaching the path which led to the swan-pool just in time to see Linnet standing at their trysting-place, only keeping tryst with him no longer. He could mark the pretty downcast face now, in the gathering shadow of the October afternoon, as he had turned so lovingly to watch it not so long ago, and not quite so far off from it, in last August moonlight. Just the same graceful droop of the shoulder, the same downward sweep of black rippling hair, the same bright, quick glance, the same nervous motion of the little foot, toying with the bits of weed and stone on the margin of the pool. Only himself rather farther off now, and another in his place, to take all that he thought was his own then.

A fair picture truly. Keith Moriston could understand at last—at any rate, he thought he could—why Mr. Aubury had denied him the opportunity of pressing his suit, and denied it, too, after having once

seemed to favour it so. Another had stepped in before him, and that other was Mr. Burstborough, with his fine house, and his good balance at the banker's, and his possible carriage and pair, and his easy self-confidence, and all his other advantages, compared with which a poor student had so little to offer, except devotion and general lack of prospects.

Keith Moriston dashed on with a fire of scorn at his heart, and Mr. Burstborough, taking for granted that nothing could be so acceptable to Linnet as his own society, proposed to accompany her to the house, where he made a very long call, and then allowed himself to be persuaded to stay for dinner. Before he left it was arranged by Mrs. Aubury that he should come over again in the morning to make the final arrangements for the picnic, which was to take place the next day but one. That picnic had really been most convenient in supplying excuses for unlimited visits to the castle. For of

course the more he thought about it the more his ideas expanded, and the more necessity there was for a lady of Mrs. Aubury's skill and practical good sense in such matters to take the lead, and secure the successful carrying through of everything.

Next morning he came over accordingly. Linnet must be there too, Mrs. Aubury said, to help in the discussion of the finishing touches. Mr. Aubury, finding himself unnecessary, went across to Miss Alvisa's, that being the day on which he generally looked over the monthly farm accounts with her.

As he reached her little room Keith Moriston was on the point of leaving it, having just said good-bye to her, before starting by the midday mail from Broadminster. He made courteous inquiries, as was of course only fitting, after the ladies at the castle, and learned from Mr. Aubury that he had left them busily engaged with Mr. Burstborough, settling the details of a

picnic which was to be given by that gentleman the following day but one.

It was a piece of information which Mr. Aubury might just as well have kept to himself, if he had had the tact which some men have in such matters; but Keith could quite understand why the wealthy contractor should be there, and why Linnet's brother should have left them to themselves, though that did not make his manners any more cordial as he said good-bye, and hurried away to catch that midday mail.

The accounts gone through, Mr. Aubury came back to his wife. There were no long, pleasant hours of converse now between him and Miss Alvisa. There was no quiet farewell kiss in which heart touched heart in a union whose sweetness scarce needed making more sweet, so blessedly was all known and believed in between them. He was helpful as ever to the woman who depended so much upon him. She was gentle and very kindly in her manner to the friend

to whom she could still supply at any rate a certain amount of intellectual sympathy. And sometimes even now, before he came away, he would look for a lingering pity in her eyes, and find it, and feel for comfort in the close clasp of her hand, and think he found that, too ; and then come home to where the calm, ladylike woman he had taken for his wife sat amongst the luxuries he had provided for her, and with a soft yet irresistible despotism made the whole household bend to her will.

She was in the castle dining-room now, and in the cosiest corner of it, as befitted the lady of the house ; and on the little work-table at her side lay her embroidery, that same long border of blackberry sprays, over one particular leaf of which her needle had stayed for awhile when Mr. Aubury made his great resolve, and took for his own a love whose giving he had never asked.

Her face was a little peevish, for a shade of silk necessary to the finishing of a blos-

som had failed, and the work was at a stand-still. Miss Alvisa had some of it, but then, under the circumstances, she could not very conveniently go to Miss Alvisa, still less could she send Linnet. Perhaps Owen might drive her over to Broadminster that afternoon, though she had heard him say something about going through the plantations for shooting, an amusement in which he did not often indulge now, because she so disliked being left alone. Still it ought to be no great hardship to him to give it up for once, the work in question being intended for the decoration of his own drawing-room. Yes, they would both go together, and perhaps Linnet with them, to avoid any unpleasant collision at the old vicarage.

Linnet sat in the window, trying to work at a little pen and ink sketch of the church, which, now that the leaves were falling, could be prettily seen behind the gables of Miss Alvisa's house through the dingle elm-trees. She would far rather have been

down amongst those trees, dreaming over the joy which surely now must be so near ; but, when her brother was not sitting with Mrs. Aubury in that chapel-room, she must be. Maria said the place gave her a chill, with its heavy groined roof and deep recesses, and niches where the holy-water had once been kept. Another spring, she thought, she should have it entirely altered and modernised, the remnants of superstition cleared away, and an air of cheerful comfort given to the place. In the meantime, when she sat in the room at all, she must have company, if not her husband's, then Linnet's.

And, somehow, what Mrs. Aubury said must be done, always was done ; she never worried, or raised her voice, or got out of temper about it, but she had a quiet way of making the whole house uncomfortable when she was not pleased. It was felt in a sort of chill vapour, which seemed to collect upon her like moisture on inner

walls when a thaw comes, and increased, like that damp, by the very warmth and geniality of the surrounding atmosphere. Do what they might in all other directions, the mist only thickened so long as that one particular thing was not attended to. And so oppressive had this vapour-secreting power become that, rather than call it into action, Mrs. Aubury was allowed to have her own way in everything, those who came within the range of her influence finding pleasing so much more comfortable than displeasing, that they quite forgot to think themselves unselfish in yielding, or her selfish in exacting the amount of consideration necessary to keep the household atmosphere in a state of clearness.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MR. AUBURY came in.

“You will take me over to Broadminster this afternoon, will you not, Owen dear? I must go to match this silk. Such a nuisance! Not more than a needleful of it wanting. I quite thought I should have enough, and I can calculate the quantity to an inch. I am so exact.”

“Miss Alvisa has some very much like it,” suggested Linnet, with almost a happy little tremble in her voice. If Maria should tell her to go over and ask for it. For the time seemed so long, sitting and waiting there, when Keith Moriston was so near. “Shall

I ask her if she can lend you some?"

Mrs. Aubury glanced keenly at her. Was she wanting an excuse to go? Had she any lingering feeling about this over-forward young man? And had she abstracted that last needleful of silk, that she might be sent across for more? One could never tell what whims and fancies girls might take into their heads.

"No, thank you, Linnet dear. I don't want to give you the trouble. Are you quite sure you have not happened to take some of the silk for anything?"

"Quite sure," said Linnet, not without an inward twitch of impatience. Maria had such a quietly provoking way, whenever she lost anything, of intimating that somebody else had made away with it. "You know I never do embroidery."

Which was true enough.

"I know you don't, my dear, but it is possible you may have used a stray needleful for something else. You know the silk

is just the colour of those gloves you said wanted mending. Nothing does annoy me so much as having my working materials interfered with."

Linnet did give an impatient twitch now, and would perhaps have given an impatient word or two as well had not Mr. Aubury come to the rescue. That there had never yet been any actual rebellion between his wife and young sister, was due to more quiet peace-making on the master's part than anyone knew. This "companionship of a refined and ladylike woman" was not turning out so very satisfactory after all.

"Never mind, Maria. I shall be very glad to drive you over, so it is all right."

"Yes, Owen dear, but the silk cannot have gone without hands. That is what I was mentioning to Linnet."

"Well, let us settle about it afterwards. What time would you like me to drive you over? I do think a little airing will do you good, and it is such a lovely day. You have

been troubling yourself too much about that picnic. You are looking quite pale."

Mrs. Aubury yielded upon the matter of the silk. To be told by her husband that she looked pale always had a soothing effect upon her. It showed that she was an object of consideration. And for the paleness to be attributed to exertions which she had been making on behalf of others, added sweetness to the soothing, because it credited her with a quality which she knew very well she did not possess, unselfishness. Mrs. Aubury was by no means a self-ignorant woman. For others to be ignorant of her was sometimes convenient.

"A little drive with you would do me good, Owen dear," she replied, with the air of a martyr. "Only that pony-carriage does shake me so. I think I have mentioned that before."

"Yes, Maria, we will have it attended to. What time would you like to start?"

"After lunch, dear, and we will have it

earlier on purpose. I do wish, Linnet, you would be careful. You see what trouble it gives. And my embroidery is really of more importance than your gloves."

"I have not mended my gloves," said Linnet, drily.

And she would scarcely have been able to resist saying more, only just then her brother changed the conversation by a remark which kept her from thinking more about either gloves or needlefuls of silk.

"I have just been to Miss Alvisa's, to go through the monthly accounts with her. Keith Moriston has made a very short visit. When I went in, he was just off to Broadminster to catch the midday mail to London."

Mrs. Aubury lifted her eyebrows. The shortness of Mr. Moriston's visit was natural enough, all things considered, and very convenient too. Still one must make some sort of remark about it.

"Curious! And after so much had been

said about his staying a month at the least. But he always seemed to me rather a changeable young man."

Mr. Aubury said nothing. That Linnet could have made the difference did not suggest itself to him.

"I am sure," continued Mrs. Aubury, carelessly, "Miss Alvisa said he was going to make a long stay, and Mr. Burstborough proposed asking him to the picnic, only I said I did not think he would be the sort of young man to enjoy it. I hope he was quite well."

"I hope so. I really had not time to ask him. He seemed in such a hurry to get away."

"Attractions elsewhere, perhaps. He has certainly altered his plans very much, and very quickly; but I do not see that we need trouble ourselves about them. One o'clock we will say for the carriage, and, Linnet, ring the bell for Tidy to put luncheon on the table at once."

Linnet said nothing. She could not quite realise it. Keith gone to London ! To-day, then, he would not come at all. Awhile ago she had longed so for the hours to pass that she might see him, and had thought herself almost unhappy because they were so slow. Now, if it were only hours that she would have to wait, not days ! But still he *would* come. It must be that he would come. Only the present brightness seemed to have faded from everything.

If she might but know a little about it ! If she could go to Miss Alvisa ! Yet she did not like to do that. It might seem like being anxious. She could only be still, and wait and wonder.

But Mrs. Aubury made the way plain for her. Now that Keith was away, there could be no harm in sending Linnet for that skein of silk. Not that the drive to Broadminster need be given up, for she liked to be taken out by her husband as

frequently as possible, and no doubt he was quite right in saying that she looked pale, after the trouble she had taken about that picnic, and chiefly on Linnet's account, too, not that the drive need be given up then, but they might take it alone now with no scruple about leaving Linnet behind, for she could always enjoy an hour or two with Miss Alvisa.

“Linnet, I have been thinking that, after all, I shall let you go across and ask Miss Alvisa if she can spare me a needleful or two. It is useless buying an entire skein when so little is required. I shall still go over to Broadminster with your brother to look after some arrangements for the picnic, so, if Miss Alvisa wishes you to stay, you can.”

“Would not a little walk do you as much good, Maria, if it is not quite necessary to go to Broadminster?” said Mr. Aubury. “I really do not like your worrying yourself so much over that affair, and I

cannot see what claim Mr. Burstborough has upon you for it."

"It does not do always to think about that," replied his wife, with the virtuous air of a woman who has now, not by any means for the first time, to teach others the nobleness of self-denial. "I always like to carry a thing through when I have once begun it; whether it is for myself or not is of no consequence. I do not think the poor fellow could manage it at all but for my help, and I should be so sorry for him to be disappointed. I shall be ready at one, and, Linnet, you must not expect us home until you see us."

"All right," said Linnet, who felt that to have a long afternoon to herself was the best thing that could happen under the circumstances.

When they were gone, she took a bit of the silk for a pattern and set off to Miss Alvisa's.

It seemed such a little while ago, only

the afternoon before, that she had trodden over those fallen autumn leaves in the dingle path, and taken off her hat to let the wind blow through her hair, and climbed the old bit of rampart to tear down the red Virginian creeper which clothed like a coronation mantle the battlemented wall at its top ; yet how different everything seemed ! What a glory had been taken out of the day ! What a cruel mist had closed round everything ! Only there was this comfort, that sunshine lay beyond it. The weariness that was upon her now was only the weariness of hope deferred, and it was scarcely enough to sicken the young heart so strong as yet in its ignorance of suffering.

Miss Alvisa looked weary too. Rarely indeed did anyone go into that little room of hers without finding brightness of some sort in it ; but to-day its atmosphere seemed laden with some undefined heaviness.

"I hoped Keith would have been here," she said, as the young girl entered, bringing with her, as Linnet always did, a feeling of health and fresh air. And, as she said it, she looked keenly into her face. There was no consciousness of wrong-doing there, only just a touch of wondering disappointment upon the hope which had been so bright the day before. "I quite expected, you know, that he was coming for a long visit, but he started away again this morning, and I am feeling very dull without him."

"Never mind. I daresay he is coming back before long," said Linnet, glad to console Miss Alvisa with the thought that was cheering herself, and glad, too, to be able to put it into words. To say it to another made it seem so much more real. "He is coming again soon, is he not?"

But Miss Alvisa's answer brought up a great darkness.

"No, Linnet, he is not coming back at all. He has gone to London now to join the Stormonts, and they start for the Continent to-night, where they are to spend the winter. He says he shall probably not see Abbot's Florey again for a very long time. Indeed he says, but I cannot understand that, that he does not care if he never sees it again at all."

Linnet sat at the head of the sofa, so that, without quite turning round, Miss Alvisa could not see her face, and she made no reply. It might have been only a few seconds, but for the storm that swept through the girl's soul, uprooting all that was fair and lovely there, and for the change that was wrought in her before she spoke again, it might have been half a lifetime. When at last she did speak, it was in a very quiet, unconcerned voice, a voice which made Miss Alvisa wonder. There was so little of disappointment, or hope, or gladness, or sorrow in it.

"Maria wanted me to come over and ask if you could give her a needleful or two of silk like this."

And Linnet laid the pattern on Miss Alvisa's book.

"She thought she had enough, but she just wants a very little to finish one blossom. Do not trouble if you have to search for it. We can send across by-and-by."

"I have it here," said Miss Alvisa, opening the little workbox which was always within reach, and taking out a skein. "There, you see, it is the exact shade. Take as much as you want."

With fingers that did not tremble at all, Linnet drew out a couple of needlefuls and folded them carefully in a scrap of paper.

"Thank you. Now I will go."

"No, not yet. Are you wanted at home?"

"Not wanted exactly. My brother and sister are gone to Broadminster. But I

should like to go back. I have things to arrange."

"For the picnic I suppose."

"The picnic?" And Linnet commanded her thoughts back from the ruined past, the still more ruined future, to the present, in which she must act as if no change had come upon anything. "The picnic? Really I had forgotten all about it. And it is to be the day after to-morrow. No, I think everything is ready for that now. But I must go all the same. I hope Mr. Moriston was quite well."

"Oh! yes, he did not seem to ail anything. And he was very full of plans and purposes. I never knew him have so many fresh things to talk about. He says he thinks he may get a professorship in some of the Continental schools, and settle there; or he may go quite abroad; or the Stor-monts might do something for him in the Indian department, where they have interest. But one thing he says is quite sure, that he

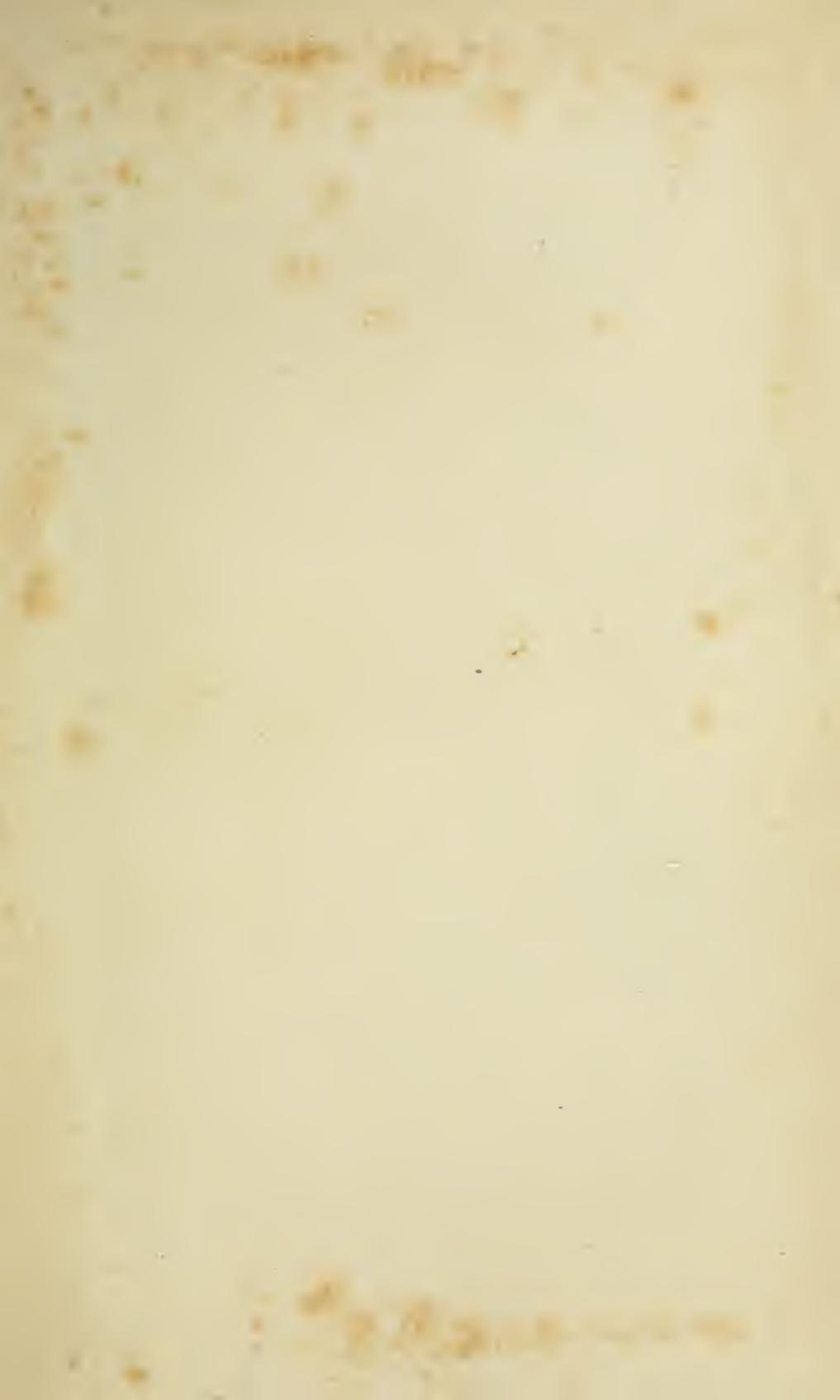
will not come back here any oftener than he can help. And what has vexed him I cannot say, or what has happened to change all his plans. Must you really go?"

"Yes, really. Good-bye."

Linnet's lips were soft and warm as she touched Miss Alvisa's in a quick kiss, and warm were the fingers that held hers for awhile. And she did not stand long enough in her sight for Miss Alvisa to see that the light in her eyes was warm and glowing too, but it was the glow of burning, passionate indignation. And her step, as she went out past the old beech-tree, and into the quiet footpath, was fleeter than ever, but it was the fleetness of the flame which careers along over the prairies, and leaves behind it only a parched and barren track, where once had been the softest, greenest grass. Of all this Miss Alvisa knew nothing at all, only that Linnet was strangely quiet over what she thought would have been so great a disappointment. And for the first time

she allowed herself to wonder whether there was any truth in the report which gossip-loving little Mrs. Polemont had brought to her some days before, that Mr. Burstborough was remarkably diligent in his visits to the castle, and that most people thought he meant something by them.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.







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